

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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The role and place of the Public Chambers in the context of civil society and social capital concepts

The article provides an overview of the conceptual foundations of civil society and social capital theories. It reflects the views of R. Putnam, one of the most reputable theorists of modern civil society. The hypothesis of a possible positive influence of the state over the development of civil society through special facilitative procedures is put forward in the article. The activity of the Public Chamber in the Vologda Oblast is considered as an example of establishing a special practice – cooperative confrontation that is used both for implementing the interests of developing civil society in coordination with the authorities and forming the constructive civic culture.

State, social capital, civil society, Public Chambers, cooperation between the government and non-governmental organizations.



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The concepts of civil society and social capital hold the special positions in the efforts to describe and define informal and often intangible social structures and relationships that can help to consolidate democratic practice.

Despite the fact that the term “civil society” is full of different meanings, it has deep historical roots. Applied by Machiavelli during the Renaissance to denote the rights of a citizen, it acquired its more common modern meaning almost two centuries ago, when de Tocqueville noted the positive relationship between civic engagement and democracy.

While the civil society is a relatively well-developed concept, although allowing a wide range of interpretations, social capital is a more recent addition to sociological discourse that was initially developed, in particular, by the radical French theorist Pierre Bourdieu [1, 2] and the American sociologist James S. Coleman [3].

Social capital is a complex concept that covers several dimensions: sociological aspect (James S. Coleman), economic aspect (e.g., Francis Fukuyama [4]) and political aspect (e.g., R. Putnam [5]), as well as group, individual, micro- and macro- levels. We have been able to

show that this multifaceted concept is rooted in Marx's capital theory, E. Durkheim's theory of solidarity and, substantially, A. de Tocqueville's political theory of democracy [6].

In his 1835 masterpiece "Democracy in America" Alexis de Tocqueville studied the characteristic tendency of Americans to form associations in order to meet their common needs and interests. When he visited the United States, it was the Americans' constant "propensity for civic association" that most impressed him. "There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types – religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute" [7]. The activity of these associations led more or less naturally to their participation in political life.

Today's use of the term "social capital" is mostly recognizable by its "Tocqueville's" inspiration. An American political scientist Robert Putnam is the most famous current follower of the French author and one of the most prominent contemporary theorists of civil society and its product – social capital. As well as A. de Tocqueville, Putnam (1993) explored the relationship between participation in associations and democracy. Putnam defines the civil society simply as a social space located between the individual and the state [8]. It includes in its most elementary sense the family, but spreads out into an almost infinite number of more or less well-organized associations. These associations are ranked from the extremely informal, such as bowling leagues, to long-standing and deeply institutionalized ones, such as churches and trade unions.

He asserts that such social associations and the level of civic engagement indicate the degree of social capital in the society. These associations and civic engagement develop and strengthen the collective norms and trust, which play a central role in creating and maintaining the mutual benefit and prosperity.

Putnam believes that the quality of public life and the performance of social institutions (and not only in America) are indeed powerfully influenced by the norms and networks of civic engagement. According to his empirical survey, Putnam comes to the conclusion that social trust, the norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement – all the sources that he calls "social capital" – are the key factors that can make democracy work and also stimulate economic prosperity. The communities that have the high levels of civic participation and, in particular, a dense network of the various ways of civic engagement, are more successful. They have better schools, faster economic development, lower crime, and more effective government. For Putnam, social capital is a critical element of any successful society.

It inheres both in individuals and communities, that is, it has both an individual and a collective face. It can be both a private and a public good, and it can be either specific or generalized. In other words, people may do things for others either because of a specific sense of obligation, or more generally because they feel a sense of kinship with a particular group in society that will benefit (or even with society as a whole).

Social capital consists of three constituent elements. They are social networks, moral norms and obligations, and social values. Social networks include informal and formal networks and associations, of which participatory voluntary associations are the most effective in creating "horizontal interaction and reciprocity" which are at the core of social capital [9].

A number of radical scholars have criticized the Putnam's interpretation of social capital as a departure from the classic Tocqueville's understanding of civil society's functions. Thus, F. Alford believes that, according to Tocqueville, there are three objectives of voluntary associations: 1) continual resistance to the state; 2) a "substitute" for

the government; 3) the release of private life. According to the first two objectives, associations are considered as an alternative centre of power, as a source of power that isn't formed and framed by public institutions and purposes. The first two meanings of associations are largely absent in Putnam's works. Only the third contribution of associations mentioned by Tocqueville takes a good deal of Putnam's analysis: civil society is an antidote to anomie, the disintegration of norms, which affects the modern society [10].

The criticism of Putnam is also built around the "depoliticization" of social capital, its exclusion from political life. Putnam's statement runs as follows, "Social capital ... is closely related to political participation in the conventional sense, but these terms are not synonymous. Political participation refers to our relations with political institutions. Social capital refers to our relations with one another" [11]. This reasoning doesn't offer logical objections, but social capital often serves empirically as an important political resource. Social capital as an investment in social relations with expected return on the "market" can be defined in general as resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions, in particular, political. We emphasize that social capital is distributed unequally in society, and it is an important resource in the political struggle. It is rooted in the historical discourses and movements, and it can be recovered and converted into new social and political contexts.

The theory of social capital is considered often as a normative theory of democratic society. Social capital availability in it is interpreted only in the positive sense: it enriches informational flows between people, promotes the tolerant attitude towards people, as well as interpersonal and normative trust, without which there can be neither collective life, nor economic cooperation, nor viable democracy.

In his early works Putnam tended to share and even extend Coleman's tendency to consider social capital as simply a social good. However, after 2001 he emphasized that social capital could be used as a resource for various purposes – both for prosocial and antisocial. From this point of view, the great importance is given to the concept of different types of social capital developed by Putnam and amended later – "bonding" and "bridging", or, according to the interpretation of L. Polishchuk and R. Menyashev, closed and opened social capital [12].

"Closed" (bonding or "tying", "binding", "encircling", "conglutinating" – the translation has not been formed) social capital refers to the ties between "equal" members of the community who form closed groups and can pursue the objectives that are contrary to the public interest.

"Open" (bridging or "linking", "overcoming") social capital is the ties over social splits between the various groups, social networks that consist of heterogeneous groups. Open social capital serves as a kind of "bridge" between the people who belong to different groups. According to Putnam, participation in voluntary associations is the most effective way to make a bridging capital.

The societies founded upon the bridging, decentralized, horizontally structured endeavors of voluntary associations, which were studied by Putnam in northern Italy, have more social capital, and, thus, they are more successful than those based upon vertical, hierarchical structures that he found in southern Italy. This final hypothesis underlies the strategy that is aimed at strengthening civil society organizations and supplementing and replacing vertical social ties with horizontal ones.

His 1993 comment that "without norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement, the Hobbesian outcome – amoral familism, clientelism, lawlessness, ineffective government, and economic stagnation – seems likelier than

successful democratization and economic development. Palermo may represent the future of Moscow” is an allusion to the hierarchical nature of both southern Italian and post-Soviet societies. And he draws attention to the difficulties of building civic society where it doesn’t already exist, “Local organizations implanted from the outside have a high failure rate. The most successful local organizations represent indigenous, participatory initiatives in relatively cohesive local communities” [13].

The distinction between the two types of capital and defining their impact on the prerequisites for regional economic growth were taken as the basis of the study “Social capital and the development of Russian cities” that was conducted under the guidance of L.I. Polishchuk by the Laboratory for Applied Analysis of Institutions and Social Capital of the National Research University “Higher School of Economics”. The analysis performed by L.I. Polishchuk and R.I. Menyashv allowed us to distinguish two main factors that can be used to measure social capital. The first factor is associated with the characteristics of social solidarity, harmony, readiness to unite and the sense of responsibility for the situation in the city. Therefore, the first factor characterizes the ability to form broad social coalitions. Not only the quantity but also the quality of social capital is of fundamental importance: the prevailing tendency to form small groups in order to search for particular solutions damages development, while civic culture and readiness to form broad social coalitions have a positive impact on the state of the economy and social sphere. The significant positive relations between the efficiency of city administrations and the situation in the cities with open social capital and civic culture, as well as negative – in the cities with closed civic capital have been revealed. According to researchers, there are significant reserves of modern social capital in Russia, which are distributed unevenly among the cities and regions of the country.

According to the study, the city of Cherepovets has turned out a civilian “leader” – it has the highest level of open social capital, well-developed civil culture and feebly marked closed networks. The reserves of social capital are high in the North-West ports – Murmansk and Arkhangelsk; its level is rather high in Tomsk and other cities. Krasnodar, Saratov and Magnitogorsk are at the bottom of this ranking; Moscow takes the middle position. Researchers mention that their data require clarification and confirmation by other sources [14].

L.I. Polishchuk fixes the task arising from the high value of social capital for development in his clear conclusions: “Since the late 90’s, when it turned out that social capital was an important developmental resource, governments around the world have been worrying about its state and dynamics. It is impossible to catalyze this process on the outside. Everything (or almost everything) in this world is imported or borrowed: new technologies, specialists, investment ... Social capital is solely a “local” product. It is only necessary to create favorable conditions to reproduce and accumulate it due to supporting an educational system (including governmental support), opening the opportunities for public initiatives, and self-organization in business and citizens’ everyday life” [Ibid]. It remains only to raise a question: what methods and tools can be used to create conditions for the accumulation of social capital?

Developed civil networks and the level of regional social capital have become the subject of another major project in recent years. The materials for general conclusion were collected in 2007 during the unique mass survey according to the technology ‘Georating’ that was conducted by the Public Opinion Fund on the questionnaire developed by the National Research University “Higher School of Economics”. The surveys covered the population aged 18 years and older in 68 regions of Russia.

The sample size amounted to 500 respondents in each region of the Russian Federation and 34 thousand respondents in Russia as a whole.

The researchers proceed from the fact that the development of civil society is uneven in Russia's regions. On the one hand, promoting the development of civil institutions is not one of the regional and municipal policy directions in all the regions. On the other hand, social and human capitals are heterogeneous per se; their development is influenced by a lot of prerequisites for the formation of civil society that lie in the sphere of the individual subject, as well as in social, political, economic and other aspects.

According to the concepts of civil society and social capital, the researchers proposed a system of indicators and developed a classification of Russia's regions in terms of favorable conditions for the development of civil society. All the regions were divided into 6 groups according to the development of prerequisites for civil society:

1) extremely unfavorable (there are three subjects of the Russian Federation in this group);

2) unfavorable (18 subjects of the Russian Federation);

3) more unfavorable than favorable (19 subjects of the Russian Federation);

4) more favorable than unfavorable (19 subjects of the Russian Federation);

5) favorable (6 subjects of the Russian Federation);

6) highly favorable (3 subjects of the Russian Federation).

According to the study, the sixth group, where the prerequisites for the development of civil society is defined as "very favorable", includes only three subjects of the Russian Federation: the Arkhangelsk, Vologda, Chelyabinsk oblasts. The high level of the Vologda Oblast's social capital confirms L.I. Polishchuk's conclusions mentioned above.

Summing up the results of the study on the regional characteristics of social capital, Irina Mersiyanova draws a general conclusion important for our topic: "It is clear that our country requires the special efforts to consolidate the social base of civil society, which is composed of the people involved in the social practices of civil society. It should be a conglomerate of stakeholders – non-government and non-profit organizations, mass media, universities, as well as all the level of authorities, which influence the arrangement of institutional conditions for the development of civil initiatives and citizens' self-realization in civic activity" [15]. Thus, the researcher also includes the authorities in a list of parties that are interested in the development of civil society.

Here, we have to go back to the critics of R. Putnam, who pointed out the fact that he had ignored the function of civil society revealed by Tocqueville – to be a form of resistance to the state, a method of self-organization against the state. Having no opportunities to present here a detailed analysis of this criticism, we have to stint ourselves of the following opinions: firstly, Tocqueville did not absolutize this function, but he fixed the empirical fact that the development of the political system in the USA took place in the climate of mass religious exaltation, wide-spread and institutionalized distrust in government and political power in general, which was resulted in the famous system of checks and balances – sharing of power, on the one hand, with a network of voluntary associations, on the other hand.

Secondly, Putnam focused on what he thought the most important – the decline of trust and civic spirit in the USA, decreasing active participation of Americans in voluntary associations that was considered by him as an extremely dangerous tendency because it threatened not only the pillar of society, but political system. Putnam's analysis

is characterized by undoubted country's specific that was reasonably pointed out by his numerous followers, who tried to apply his concept for the countries and political systems outside the United States and who found different tendencies in the development of social capital in their own countries as compared with the USA.

Thus, the discussion about the relationship between the civil society and the state with regard to Russia is expanded with a different focus and in other cultural and political context. That is illustrated, by the way, by the above researchers' quotations who couldn't be reproached for their loyalty and idealization of the current Russian state: it is impossible to develop the civil society in Russia through its head-on confrontational opposition to the state and against the state. Thereupon, we should consider the assumption that functioning of political institutions can have facilitative influence on the development of collective social capital and social cohesion indicators.

Certainly, we will have to answer the question on the base of inter-regional and cross-national comparative researches: whether the state and political institutions are able to make a positive contribution to the development of social capital and civil society, and, in case of positive answer, to what extent they are able to do this. But a preliminary hypothesis can be defined among many possible ones for this study: systematic public involvement into solving important political and other problems; the policy of the "involvement" of social groups and voluntary organizations into the actual process of political decision-making at the various levels of governance rather than ejection policy contributes to forming trust culture, a lack of which is always confirmed by sociological studies. Let us suggest cautiously that a tool of public "involvement" into the discussion of political issues is Public Chambers – both nationwide and regional ones.

The establishment and activities of federal (since 2005) and regional Public Chambers haven't become the subject of systematic research yet, although interesting materials are collected and summarized in a range of publications and theses.

There is no consensus in the academic and expert community about the place and influence of this institution in the political and public spheres. The assessment of the role of regional Public Chambers in the system of political governance and the development of regional civil society are divergent, if not to say they are polar. The problems, failures and shortcomings in their work are widely discussed.

Generalized negative evaluations of the Public Chambers given by the critics can be summarized as follows. This is "the House of Lords" of which two thirds are appointed by the government, and the rest part consists of the politically loyal representatives of public organizations or media stars who are devoid of ability to do laborious team tasks for the benefit of society. This is a surrogate representation under the rather abstract credentials, an imitation, and a showcase of authoritarianism that is not worth any public attention or resources expended.

This is a vision that can be easily found in online discussions, but it is both dreary and false according to its preconditions and the opinions that are included in it.

Surely, the Public Chamber is a deliberative body; it is neither legislative nor executive body. Indeed, the duplication of the Parliament (in addition to the inefficient Parliament) would be a waste of resources. Thus, the Chamber is not a political organization according to both its formal status and the essence of activity. In terms of initial attitudes towards the authority, the Chamber is a systemic opposition, but at the same time, it is a non-political tool; it does not form the power, it does not the power, but it tries to influence the power. It is a non-political opposition because, according to

Tocqueville's concept, it cannot but criticize the government and the state; it cannot but put tough questions and bring forth acute problems to the authorities.

But the Public Chamber cannot be an irresponsible and unconstructive opposition due to the links through its members with the concrete public interests and thousands of participants of different associations. After all, only due to its separation from the authorities and simultaneous addressing to it, the Public Chamber can become an instance that will be able to set the various branches of government listening to itself, aggregating the interests and views of civil society and achieving the satisfaction of its interests. This ambiguous status – “cooperative opposition” – often makes its assessment problematic.

Let's consider this duality of Chamber's functioning in terms of two recent cases of non-confrontational opposition between the Public Chamber of the Vologda Oblast and the Government of the Oblast.

Case one. Having been a donor for the federal budget and a region with surplus budget for many years before the crisis, the Vologda Oblast has become a debtor with the rapidly growing public debt after the crisis (*table*). There was a budget deficit in 58 subjects of the Russian Federation at the end of 2009, and it accounted for more than 10% of budget expenditures in 12 regions (exclusive of subventions). There was the maximum percentage of the consolidated budget deficit in the Vologda Oblast. The situation was worsening in 2010 – 2012.

Having ranked 6th according to the public debt in 2012, the Vologda Oblast has come on the brink of default and introducing external financial management by the federal government. The Governor and the Government of the Vologda Oblast have developed the measures to optimize the budget and create the programme to overcome the budget crisis in the Vologda Oblast. This painful, tough plan that proposed cost cutting in all the spheres also involved the termination of a number of capital investment projects, revision of the oblast's special purpose programmes, large-scale reduction of the state apparatus, reduction of social benefits, etc. After a wide public discussion of the proposed reductions of social payments, and after the consultations with the Public Chamber of the Vologda Oblast, the programme was adjusted toward the improvement of social benefits. At the same time, the Public Chamber generally supported the programme and its measures as a necessary way to recover the region's economy.

Acting as a qualified intermediary between civil society and the government, along with other institutions, the Public Chamber hasn't allowed an unconstructive politicization of an acute and urgent issue, but it also hasn't allowed solving the problems of state finance, completely passing them on to the population, especially its low-income and disadvantaged social groups.

Case two. According to its mandate, the Public Chamber of the Vologda Oblast prepared the analysis of the oblast's draft law “On the regional budget for 2013 and the planning period of 2014 and 2015”.

The dynamics of the Vologda Oblast's public debt in 2008 – 2012.

RF subject	01.01.2009		01.01.2010		01.01.2011		01.01.2012		01.09.2012		
	Bln. rub.	%*	In % to 01.01.12.								
Vologda Oblast	1.8	3.8	11.0	39.4	19.0	52.8	26.9	67.0	27.3	98.2	101.3
For reference: Russian Federation	599.6	12.2	1024.5	24.1	1265.8	25.4	1387.3	23.8	1332.8	31.8	96.1

* The percentage of public debt in the volume of tax and non-tax revenues of the consolidated budget.
Sources: the data of the Ministry of Finance of RF, the Treasury of Russia; ISED T RAS.

The session of the Public Chamber on the issue of the Vologda Oblast's socio-economic development and the oblast's draft law "On the regional budget for 2013 and the planning period of 2014 and 2015" was held on 16 November 2012. The chamber adopted the Resolution on the draft budget law, which states that "the Public Chamber of the Vologda Oblast considers it impossible to support the oblast's draft law "On the regional budget for 2013 and the planning period of 2014 and 2015", because it does not correspond to the goals of socio-economic development of the country and its regions, stated in President V.V. Putin's pre-election programme articles and his decrees dated 7 May, 2012 aimed at improving the living standards of the regions' population through the development of economy, enhancement of government performance, reduction of extreme social inequality and provision of social justice" [16]. Among other things it was noted that the draft oblast's budget doesn't take into account the available reserves of revenues increase. The critical viewpoint of the chamber was brought to the oblast's Government and the Legislative Assembly, it was highlighted in the press and became known to the public.

At the end of November, the deputies of the Legislative Assembly and the Oblast Government decided to revise the draft budget in order to increase the salaries of school and kindergarten teachers, and also to clarify the revenues of the Oblast budget. Finally, on 12 December 2012, the Oblast Legislative Assembly promptly adopted the oblast's budget for 2013. It was agreed that additional revenues to the oblast's budget would be allocated for a gradual increase of cultural workers' salaries, social welfare, education and medicine. Obviously, the voice of the Public Chamber was quite weighty and authoritative among the critics of the draft budget.

How representative are these cases?

Of course, one or two cases are not enough for making large-scale general conclusions. A

comprehensive survey of the actual role of regional Public Chambers is required, so that it could be possible to make a conclusion concerning their significance for the political process and for increasing the influence and competence of civil society. But this is exactly the case when, like in a good photo, the characteristic features of the object are reflected.

The solution of the problems by means of politics is always preceded by a very important period when a significant issue of public life, a social problem, which has already taken shape, but still hasn't caught public attention, must seize people's consciousness and form public opinion. In fact, the mechanism that implements this process is the very network of civil society, and the Public Chambers are one of its elements. They are quite capable of acting as early warning systems revealing acute problems in the spheres of economy, ecology, human rights, etc., they attract the attention of politicians, officials, journalists, they make these issues the subject of public discussion. Politics is formed on this very basis, in this very context. And these are the two sides of the same coin – with power and political life on the one side, and structures and networks of civil society, in particular, the Public Chamber – on the other side. And as politics can't exist without civil structures that highlight relevant issues, so the structures of civil society can't exist without politics that resolves these issues.

Under painful reforms, when, acting for the "patient's" own good, authorities don't pay attention to what the patient himself tries to say, the most obvious consequence of such a manipulation will be the alienation of people from power. The Public Chamber should carry out its activities to ensure that people's opinion is taken into account in the reforms.

Can any single institution, such as the Public Chamber, adequately and fully represent the interests of civil society? Obviously, it can't. Civil society is multisided, versatile and

chaotic by its nature. That's why its interests are necessarily expressed through a variety of institutions. But being a very important link in a network of civil society, raising urgent issues on its behalf and seeking their solutions by government, the Chamber will, no doubt, revive the citizens' faith in the ability to be heard. And it is the very trust, which, according to modern concepts, is the "currency" on the market of social capital.

The democratization process in Russia is going on with considerable difficulties and

much slower than many analysts predicted. Theorists of civil society and social capital suggest a plausible explanation in this connection. But this process is, undoubtedly, moving on, and our two examples, appear to confirm this viewpoint. Democracy is based on the free expression of different opinions and interests, and the North of Russia, the Vologda Oblast, is gradually establishing the structure of independent both horizontal and vertically integrated organizations, which contribute to this free expression.

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