

DEVELOPMENT OF MUNICIPAL FORMATIONS

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© Maksimov A.M., Nenasheva M.V., Vereshchagin I.F., Shubina T.F., Shubina P.V.

Creating a Comfortable Urban Environment: Problems of Interaction between Society and Government in the Implementation of Priority Projects at the Management Municipal Level*



**Anton M.
MAKSIMOV**

N. Laverov Federal Center for Integrated Arctic Research of the Russian Academy of Sciences
Arkhangelsk, Russian Federation
e-mail: a.maksimov@fciarctic.ru
ORCID: 0000-0003-0959-2949; ResearcherID: I-3948-2018



**Marina V.
NENASHEVA**

Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov
Higher School of Social Sciences, Humanities and International Communication
Arkhangelsk, Russian Federation
e-mail: m.nenasheva@yandex.ru
ORCID: 0000-0002-2875-5638; ResearcherID: M-5829-2015



**Il'ya F.
VERESHCHAGIN**

Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov
Higher School of Social Sciences, Humanities and International Communication
Arkhangelsk, Russian Federation
e-mail: i.vereshchagin@narfu.ru
ORCID: 0000-0002-5405-0762; ResearcherID: U-4111-2017

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**Tat'yana F.
SHUBINA**

Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov
Higher School of Social Sciences, Humanities and International
Communication
Arkhangelsk, Russian Federation
e-mail: t.shubina@narfu.ru
ORCID: 0000-0002-2403-9810; ResearcherID: AAK-8247-2020



**Polina V.
SHUBINA**

Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov
Higher School of Social Sciences, Humanities and International
Communication
Arkhangelsk, Russian Federation
e-mail: p.shubina@narfu.ru
ORCID: 0000-0002-7380-1947; ResearcherID: AAB-8552-2020

Abstract. The federal program on the formation of comfortable urban environment was initiated in Russia in 2017. Its aim is to improve local and public territories. The program implies the active involvement of citizens, which is taken into account in the Urban Environment Quality Index. On the basis of an empirical study, conducted using mass survey and expert interview methods in the towns of the Arkhangelsk Oblast, the authors analyze a degree of civic participation of residents in the implementation of projects to create a comfortable urban environment and assess the efficiency of existing mechanisms of interaction between society and government. We assume the theoretical provision that a social activity is the citizens' work to transform the environment, carried out under the influence of external and internal factors. External factors include activities of municipal authorities to inform town residents about the program for creating a comfortable urban environment and to involve them in the implementation of projects. Internal factors are citizens' personal interest and their meaningful participation in the program. The results of the sociological survey indicate a high potential for citizens' social activity, which is a necessary condition for effective interaction between government and society and a successful implementation of the program. However, practical participation of urban residents remains weak. The main reasons are the lack of citizens' awareness about the implemented program, the lack of clear ways of interaction between government and society, as well as an understanding of the program's fundamental principles, which, in turn, leads to passivity and distrust toward the authorities. The authors conclude that, in order to increase civic engagement, we need a system of measures, which would allow adjusting the existing communication means between government and society and increasing the effectiveness of the program on the formation of a comfortable urban environment.

Key words: civic participation, urban resident, comfortable urban environment, engagement, public communication, municipal administration, urban community.

Introduction

A city is an environment that includes the nature cultivated by man and the artificial space created by man. The urban environment is a set of various factors and conditions that control an individual and are controlled by an individual. Studies on the influence of the urban environment on people have been conducted since antiquity, but the scientific basis of urbanism was laid only at the turn of the 19th–20th centuries.

In the first quarter of the 20th century, research on the urban environment was developing within the framework of the Chicago School of Sociology (R. Park, E. Burgess, L. Wirth). The latter pointed out that “nowhere has the human race strayed so far from organic nature as in the living conditions typical of a large city” [1, p. 170]. Spatial and temporal disunity of certain types of daily activities is a distinctive feature of modern urban life. Researchers note that the city provides opportunities for various activities, but at the same time weakens family and neighborhood ties; the nature of relations changes from emotional to formal, solidarity is replaced by competition, secondary contacts become prevailing, and social relations are segmented.

There are four main localization points for citizens' daily activities: 1) cultural institutions (theaters, cinemas, circuses, museums, libraries, etc.); 2) workplace, where an individual spends a significant part of the day; 3) home, where individual mass communication media (telephone, radio, TV, Internet, newspapers, etc.) are concentrated; 4) urban environment (streets, squares, public gardens, parks, courtyards). The urban environment and the home form two poles (centers) of daily activity of an urban resident: public and personal. In the former, people implement their potential as representatives of a civic population, as residents of a city, in the latter – as members of a small group, community, and family. It is important that the

urban environment, home, workplace, and cultural institutions make up for the “partial nature” of urban existence of individuals by involving them in the urban way of life.

The next stage in the study of the urban environment took place in the 1960s–1970s, when interdisciplinary research focused on identifying criteria for the quality of the urban environment that are suitable for people and society. Thus, R. Barker concluded that human behavior could not be explained outside of its connections with the immediate environment, together they create an eco-behavioral cycle [2, pp. 143–165]. K. Lynch placed human perception of the urban environment at the center, thus laying the foundation for the so-called environmental approach. He linked the spatial and temporal dimensions of the environment into a single view of it – a holistic one, “almost impossible to dissect, with all the various connections that permeate it” [3, p. 6].

Today, the term “urban environment” can be interpreted from different perspectives: as a spatial and material structure, a functional space that includes the masses of people concentrated in the “space of their staying” and the “space of communication”, and as an object of management [4, pp. 3–7]. The urban environment is considered as the relation of various subjects (individuals and groups) to the physical and social surroundings, which they develop in the process of interaction with other urban subjects [5, pp. 722–730]. The quality of the urban environment is associated with the following indicators: involvement of citizens in urban communities, ability to implement one's potential at work, satisfaction of urban residents with the functioning of various institutions and service facilities, public spaces, variety and intensity of leisure and everyday practices of urban residents implemented at the expense of urban infrastructure [6].

Working on the projects for the development of the urban environment, despite the conceptual renewal of modern Russian urban thought, one still uses the term “population”, like in Soviet times; i.e., instead of designing conditions enabling social activity, one continues to calculate normative needs for life necessities [7, p. 41]. The root of these problems lies in the lack of engagement of urban residents in the transformation of the urban environment. Citizens do not perceive the space of a post-Soviet city as their own, rather – as someone else’s or “nobody’s”. It is the resident of the city who connects their life with this very area and who should be interested in creating and maintaining a comfortable urban environment there. Through regular communication, residents create an urban community with the following features: it is functioning within a specific urban area; it has a single culture and value system; it is self-organized with the help of sustainable internal communication and interaction with the urban environment.

Thus, at present, urban studies link the prospects for the formation of a comfortable urban environment not so much with a technocratic approach in urban planning, but with an approach aimed at involving urban communities in the transformation of their own environment by managing public discourse (between bureaucratic structures and the public).

One of the theorists in the field of research on public discourse is the German philosopher J. Habermas – the author of the theory of communicative action. According to J. Habermas, a communicative action is a specific type of social action that is focused on achieving mutual understanding between two or more actors involved in communication. A communicative action is distinguished from an instrumental action, which is aimed at achieving a practical result, regardless of the presence or absence of agreement between the participants of the activity and a critical understanding of the prerequisites, principles and

socially significant implications of this activity [8, pp. 199–200]. It follows that the management of public communication is aimed at finding mutual understanding and agreement between various actors of social relations. Consent cannot be forcibly imposed by one subject of interaction on another – it is the result of rational approval by individuals of each other’s statements and actions in the public space, finding common ground in the ideas of various actors of communication about the legitimate social order [9, pp. 113–197].

J. Habermas’ approach promotes a deeper understanding of the logic of the relationships that arise between authorities, non-governmental organizations and urban communities in the process of coordinating collective interests and socially significant goals. This approach sets a conceptual framework for addressing practical problems in planning and managing public discourse. In the 21st century, this topic is actively developed by specialists from foreign countries, and it already has a certain research tradition [10–12].

In world studies, the methodological potential of the theory of communicative action is illustrated by various topics – from the functions of the media in urban self-government [13] to the formation of local communities through involvement in local eco-politics [14].

The effectiveness of local governments in the field of improvement of the urban environment largely depends on the successful interaction between municipal governments and city residents. This interaction should be based on mutual awareness, interest and willingness to participate jointly in this process. At the same time, urban residents should not act as an object of management or a “suppliant” waiting for help from the authorities; rather, they should become actively involved in urban policy. Municipal management involves interacting on local issues, where the subject is municipal authorities, and the object is urban space and the urban community. However,

specific studies have long pointed out the need not only to unite the efforts of urban communities, non-profit organizations, local businesses and municipal authorities to address urgent issues of urban development, but also to create a special communication infrastructure that ensures regular interaction between all the interested parties on a wide range of issues (what is called development support communication in foreign literature) [15, pp. 568–569]. So, for example, Yu.V. Kataeva believes that the “asymmetry” of the interests of the main actors involved in the development of the urban environment can be reduced by eliminating the existing imbalance and harmonizing their interests [16].

In recent years, the problems of communicative action in domestic research have been developed in the context of urban activism and the processes of self-organization of urban communities. Within the framework of this topic, we can distinguish the works of E.V. Tykanova, A.M. Khokhlova, A.I. Kol’ba and their colleagues. They prove that urban communities acquire their subjectivity in the field of public communication as a result of a conflict of interests of local groups of city residents, provided that these groups have their informal leaders and if local government agencies and individual business groups consider urban space as an object of commercial use [17; 18; 19]. The researchers also emphasize that Russian cities are characterized by the dysfunctionality of formal institutions of public communication; this fact gives rise to a number of alternative strategies of urban activism (mobilization of civil protest, transfer of the conflict to the regional level, development of informal “civil infrastructure”) [17; 18; 20]. This indicates that the problem of reforming the institutional framework of communication management at the municipal (city) level remains acute in the Russian context.

In recent years, many researchers have focused on the problem of using modern information and

communication technologies to streamline public communications. Wide and stable access to the Internet and the various online services that city residents actively use provide technological prerequisites for regular system-wide communication between the public and municipal authorities and contribute to a larger and more diverse participation of urban activists and ordinary citizens in the policy of reorganizing/structuring urban spaces and their improvement [21, p. 21; 22, pp. 139–141]. In the future, introduction of such technologies will make it possible to implement the concept of a “smart city”, under which a variety of online services that optimize the relations of urban residents with municipal authorities and municipal services are combined into a coherent and integral system, thus improving the quality of life and comfort of the urban environment [23, p. 586].

Speaking about the Russian reality, we note that since 2011 the federal target program “Housing”¹ has been implemented, its goal is to provide citizens with affordable and comfortable housing and improve the quality of housing and communal services. The program “Providing citizens of the Russian Federation with affordable and comfortable housing and with efficient utilities services” adopted in 2014 for the first time formulated the task of promoting placemaking projects in urban and rural settlements and creating a comfortable living

¹ On the federal target program “Housing” for 2011–2015: Resolution of the Government of the Russian Federation of December 17, 2010 no. 1050. *Collection of Legislation of the Russian Federation*, 2011, no. 5, Article 739; On the federal target program “Housing” for 2015–2020: Resolution of the Government of the Russian Federation of December 17, 2010 no. 1050. (amended on December 30, 2016). *Collection of Legislation of the Russian Federation*, 2011, no. 5, Article 739. Available at: <http://www.szrf.ru/szrf/doc.phtml?nb=100&isid=1002011005000&docid=73>; On the approval of the state program of the Russian Federation “Providing affordable and comfortable housing and communal services to citizens of the Russian Federation”: Order of the Government of the Russian Federation of November 30, 2012 no. 2227-r. *Collection of Legislation of the Russian Federation*, 2012, no. 50, Article. 7079. Available at: <http://www.szrf.ru/szrf/doc.phtml?nb=100&isid=1002012050060&docid=142>

environment for human activity as a condition for improving the quality of life. In 2017, a range of orders and methodological recommendations were issued for the implementation of the program for the formation of a modern urban environment and the involvement of the public in this process, as well as a technique for determining the urban environment quality index.

Urban residents have four main requirements to the urban environment: safety, comfort, functionality, and aesthetics. Positive implications of the formation of a comfortable urban environment include, among other things, efficient economic development, reduction in the degree of social tension and the level of morbidity. The priority project “Creating a comfortable urban environment” within the national project “Housing and the urban environment”² deals not only with cities, but also with all settlements with a population of more than 1,000 people. It is assumed that by 2024, all localities with a population of more than 1,000 people should: 1) adopt new or update old rules of urban improvement, 2) adopt municipal programs for urban improvement with the list of addresses of yard territories and the most visited municipal territories. The federal Internet portal “Comfortable urban environment and housing and utilities services” compiles the rating of constituent entities of the Russian Federation on the implementation of the project “Creating a comfortable urban environment”; in 2018 the Arkhangelsk Oblast was on the 16th place in this rating³. Scientific research on the effectiveness of the implementation of the “Comfortable urban environment” program

is being conducted. The main issues under consideration are as follows: 1) involvement of residents in the project implementation process; researchers indicate that civic engagement in the implementation of the program depends largely on the effectiveness of the use of information communication channels, residents’ trust in the local authorities and the availability of effective methods of communication between government and society⁴; 2) territorial and architectural planning as an integral factor in making cities more comfortable; it is emphasized that architectural and planning decision-making should take into account the interests of local population⁵; 3) municipal management effectiveness in the implementation of a priority project for the formation of a comfortable urban space⁶.

Projects for the qualitative transformation of the urban environment can be initiated by residents; they should be publicly discussed and co-financed. Residents’ engagement in this process is welcome, civic oversight should be ensured, and the priority measures include creating tools for this measure.

⁴ Dmitrieva N.N., Ipatova T.M. Formation of comfort city environment – as a strategic direction of development of the project “Housing and city environment”. *Sotsial’no-ekonomicheskoe upravlenie: teoriya i praktika=Socio-Economic Management: Theory and Practice*, 2018, no. 1 (32), pp. 95–98; Petrina O.A., Stadolin M.E. Comfortable urban environment: trends and problems of the organization. *Vestnik universiteta=University Herald*, 2018, no. 6, pp. 34–38.

⁵ Shershov S.O., Chasovskii V.I., Shershova L.V. Territorial planning as an aspect in creating a comfortable urban environment in Russian cities. In: *Sbornik trudov konferentsii “Sovremennye stroitel’nye materialy i tekhnologii”*, Kaliningrad, 23–30 maya 2018 g. [Proceedings of the conference “Modern construction materials and technologies”, Kaliningrad, May 23–30, 2018]. Pp. 149–173; Bushmakova Yu.V., Dubova O.V., Shorkina Yu.A. Problems of forming a comfortable urban environment in the city of Gornozavodsk. *Vestnik Permskogo natsional’nogo issledovatel’skogo politekhnicheskogo universiteta=PNRPU Sociology and Economics Bulletin*, 2019, no. 1 (33), pp. 21–35.

⁶ Goryainov V.A., Barchukov T.A. Improving the effectiveness of the implementation of the program “Comfortable urban environment” (on the example of Yemanzhelinsky Municipal District of the Chelyabinsk Oblast). *Gumanitarnyi traktat=Humanitarian Treatise*, 2019, no. 60, pp. 12–18.

² Passport of the priority project “Creating a comfortable urban environment” (approved by the Presidium of the Presidential Council for Strategic Development and Priority Projects, Protocol no. 10 of November 21, 2016, with amendments and supplements). Available at: <https://base.garant.ru/71678208/>

³ Internet portal “Comfortable urban environment and housing and utilities services”. Available at: <http://gorodsreda.ru>

It is necessary to form a system for assessing the quality of the urban environment, the key parameters of which are engagement of urban residents, and availability of civic oversight tools⁷.

Residents' interest, involvement, and the openness of discussion are the main principles and approaches to increasing civic participation. T.M. Dridze points out that a person, "when arranging 'an environment in which they live' and continuously addressing important problems, has to increase purposeful activity, develop vital solutions, choose strategies, means and ways to achieve the desired result. The very need to make this choice can create certain "moments of tension" in the life situations of individuals and determine specific forms of their lifestyle, the nature of the resources they use to address vital and socially significant issues "[24, p. 25].

In the context of the formation of a comfortable urban environment at the present stage, one of the features of civic participation is the degree of involvement of citizens in urban improvement projects, i.e., the feature characterizing urban residents' participation in the process of urban governance through broad discussion of projects, oversight and assistance in their implementation, and evaluation of the success of transformations. The program provides for institutional ways of involving urban residents in urban improvement activities: information, advisory support, questionnaires, surveys, etc. Based on the results of the monitoring, a public rating of cities by the level of urban comfort is created for each municipality and region. The ratings will help to achieve publicity, understand the weaknesses of each municipality, and make the right decisions.

⁷ On the approval of methodological recommendations for the preparation of state (municipal) programs for the formation of a modern urban environment in the framework of the priority project "Formation of a comfortable urban environment" for 2017: Order of the Ministry of Construction of the Russian Federation no. 114 of February 21, 2017. Available at: <https://www.minstroyrf.ru/docs/13709/>

No less important is citizens' personal activity, which is expressed in the involvement of urban residents in the initiation and implementation of projects to create a comfortable urban environment. We agree with L.I. Nikovskaya and I.A. Skalaban who give the following definition of civic engagement: it is "the processes by which citizens directly or indirectly influence the decisions made by the authorities and affecting public interests" [25, p. 48]. We believe that civic engagement in the urban improvement program is impossible without an effective system of communication between government and society. The study of this system is the goal of our work.

Empirical research methodology

In April – November 2019, we conducted an empirical study on creating a comfortable urban environment in major cities of the Arkhangelsk Oblast. Special attention was focused on the issues of interaction between city residents and municipal self-government during the development and implementation of measures to create a comfortable urban environment.

The geography of the study covers five cities of regional significance: Arkhangelsk, Severodvinsk, Novodvinsk, Kotlas and Koryazhma. Arkhangelsk is an administrative and a major industrial center and transport hub of the region. The population of the city is 355,476 inhabitants⁸. Severodvinsk is another major industrial center of the oblast, with a population of 183,284 inhabitants⁹; until recently it had the status of a restricted-access city due to the location of large defense enterprises on its territory. As a result, the city has developed a special relationship between government, defense enterprises and urban residents, mostly employed by these enterprises. A similar situation is observed

⁸ Main indicators of the socio-economic situation in municipalities. Department of the Federal State Statistics Service for the Arkhangelsk Oblast and Nenets Autonomous Okrug. Available at: https://arhangelskstat.gks.ru/main_indicators

⁹ *Ibidem*.

in the cities that we have combined into a group of “small towns”: Novodvinsk (38,082 inhabitants), Kotlas (74,274 inhabitants) and Koryazhma (36,224 inhabitants)¹⁰. Each of them has its backbone enterprise, the activities of which determine both the economic situation of the population and the state of the urban environment.

In the framework of the empirical study we developed a set of tools aimed at studying three major issues:

- 1) ideas and expectations of urban residents of the Arkhangelsk Oblast concerning measures to create a comfortable urban environment;
- 2) institutional forms and informal communication practices in the system of relations between regional/city authorities and the urban community;
- 3) public and expert assessment of the quality of the regulatory and organizational frameworks necessary for the development of urban space.

The main methods of data collection were the mass survey of urban residents and the expert survey.

The general population of the mass survey included 527,279 full-aged residents of the cities listed above. The sample population was 783 people. The sample was quota-based and representative by gender, age, and place of residence. Sampling error did not exceed 3.48%.

The questionnaire developed for the mass survey contained 37 questions, combined in five units: 1) social feeling of urban residents, 2) awareness of citizens about the program “Creating a comfortable urban environment”, 3) participation of residents in the communication with the authorities on the formation of a comfortable urban environment, 4) involvement of residents in the implementation of measures to create a comfortable urban environment, 5) socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics of respondents. The survey data was processed using the IBM SPSS Statistics software package for statistical analysis.

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*

The expert survey was conducted with the use of semi-structured interviews. Representatives of the following two groups were involved as experts: the first group included state and municipal employees, whose official duties are directly related to the formation of a comfortable urban environment; the second group consisted of leaders and activists of local non-profit organizations engaged in the development of urban public spaces. The sample for the first group was formed by target selection, for the second group – by the “snowball” method. A total of 15 expert interviews were conducted in Arkhangelsk, Severodvinsk, Novodvinsk and Kotlas, ten of them – with representatives of the municipal authorities of Arkhangelsk, Severodvinsk and Novodvinsk, and five – with representatives of non-profit associations. The average length of the interview was at least 60 minutes. In Kotlas, the answers to the questions of the expert interview were received in writing. Representatives of the municipal government of Koryazhma refused to participate in the survey.

The purpose of the expert survey was to determine the main channels of communication and forms of cooperation between municipal authorities and the urban community on the development of urban space, priority areas and key measures to create a comfortable urban environment, the role of urban residents and non-governmental associations in the development and implementation of urban improvement projects.

Results of the study

The results of the study are structured as follows:

- 1) views and expectations of Arkhangelsk Oblast residents concerning the measures to create a comfortable urban environment;
- 2) institutional forms and informal communication practices in the system of relations between regional/city authorities and the public;
- 3) civic and expert assessment of the quality of the regulatory and organizational foundations necessary for the development of urban space.

Views and expectations of Arkhangelsk Oblast residents concerning the measures to create a comfortable urban environment

Table 1 shows gender and age characteristics of the sample (broken down by city). Figure 1 shows the structure of the sample by income indicator.

Expressing their attitude toward the place of their current residence, respondents gave different answers. Thus, when asked “Are you satisfied with

living in your city?”, 56.8% answered they were (the sum of answers “completely satisfied”, “sooner satisfied”), and 36.9% said they were not (the sum of answers “not fully satisfied” “sooner dissatisfied”). At the same time, statistically significant differences (at the level of $p < 0.001$) for this indicator broken down by city are extremely insignificant. Severodvinsk residents have slightly higher satisfaction with life in their hometown (Tab. 2).

Table 1. Gender and age structure of the sample (n = 783), % of the number of respondents, broken down by city

	Men				Women			
	18–29	30–49	Over 50	Total	18–29	30–49	Over 50	Total
Arkhangelsk	47.4	24.4	53.9	41.9	56.1	49.7	53.0	52.3
Severodvinsk	24.7	39.5	42.2	36.3	23.2	26.9	26.8	26.1
Small towns	27.8	36.1	3.9	21.8	20.7	23.4	20.2	21.6

Source: own research.

Figure 1. Self-assessment of purchasing power of respondents (n = 783), % of the number of respondents



Table 2. Distribution of answers to the question “Are you satisfied with living in your city?” (n = 783), % of the number of respondents, broken down by city

	Arkhangelsk	Severodvinsk	Small towns
I am completely satisfied	12.4	9.0	14.4
I am sooner satisfied, in general	39.8	57.2	39.2
I am sooner dissatisfied, in general	30.5	23.2	23.3
I am completely dissatisfied	11.5	6.3	12.7
I find it difficult to answer	5.7	4.3	10.3

Source: own research.

Respondents' opinions about the changes in the quality of the urban environment in their current place of residence were approximately equally divided between positive and negative. When answering the question "In your opinion, how has the state of the city changed over the past three years?", 32% of respondents noted there were improvements, 34.4% indicated a deterioration in the situation, and 33.6% did not notice changes in the state of the city over the past three years. A comparison of the distribution of opinions on this indicator in different cities has shown some statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) differences in favor of small towns (Tab. 3).

The assessment of actual results of improvement of the urban environment (as a whole) is noticeably more negative than the satisfaction with living in the city: 73% of respondents are more or less dissatisfied with the improvement of the urban space (the sum of the answers "dissatisfied", "sooner dissatisfied"), and only about 23% expressed a positive opinion on this matter (the sum of the answers "satisfied", "sooner satisfied"). We might assume that a significant difference in the results of assessments on indicators of satisfaction with place of residence and improvement of the urban environment is associated with the influence of economic factors – people are satisfied with the availability of well-paid jobs, allowances and benefits for living in conditions equated to the conditions of the Far North. However, the calculation of the rank correlation coefficient showed the actual absence

of a linear relationship between income level and satisfaction with the place of residence (Spearman's $r = 0.129$). In addition, we revealed no correlation between this indicator and the socio-professional status of respondents¹¹. There is some correlation (at $p < 0.001$) between the assessment of the state of the urban environment and respondents' education level, in particular, people with secondary vocational and higher education are more skeptical. However, this relationship is very weak (Cramér's $V = 0.139$). A similar situation is observed in the correlation between respondents' satisfaction with living in their city and the indicator of education – people with higher education, including those with incomplete higher education, are somewhat less satisfied with their place of residence than everyone else (Cramér's $V = 0.177$). Thus, the differences in economic status, profession, and education level do not allow us to explain why citizens are generally satisfied with their place of residence, but are not satisfied with the improvement of the urban space.

At the same time, these two indicators correlate relatively well (correlation strength is slightly below median) with a variable that reflects the distribution of estimates of changes in the state of the urban environment over the past three years. In other words, respondents who note positive changes in the improvement of their city are more likely to express satisfaction with living in it (Spearman's $r = 0.318$) and have a higher assessment of the quality of the urban environment at the time of the survey (Spearman's $r = 0.357$). Correlations of this kind

Table 3. Distribution of answers to the question "In your opinion, how has the state of the city changed over the past three years?" (n = 783), % of the number of respondents, broken down by city

	Arkhangelsk	Severodvinsk	Small towns
Improved	4.9	3.5	11.1
Sooner improved	27.8	21.4	29.4
Did not change	31.5	35.4	35.7
Sooner deteriorated	22.3	28.9	15.4
Deteriorated	13.6	10.8	8.5
Source: own research.			

¹¹ We also did not reveal any correlation between the professional affiliation or economic status of respondents and their assessments of the improvement of the urban environment.

are quite logical and expected. We find it interesting to point out those correlation analysis results, which show that respondents' satisfaction with the fact of living in a particular city is affected by the extent to which they associate their future with this city (Spearman's $r = 0.505$) and to what extent they are satisfied with their life in general (Spearman's $r = 0.439$), and their satisfaction with the state of the urban environment is influenced by their assessment of the work of municipal authorities aimed at improving the city (Spearman's $r = 0.392$).

Institutional forms and informal communication practices in the system of relations between regional/city authorities and the public

We point out that the units of indicators that are of major importance in our research are those that allow us to measure the interest of urban residents in the public life of the city, their awareness of the

activities of municipal authorities and regional authorities in the field of urban improvement, and the extent of participation in public discussions of the issues related to this activity and in the implementation of relevant measures.

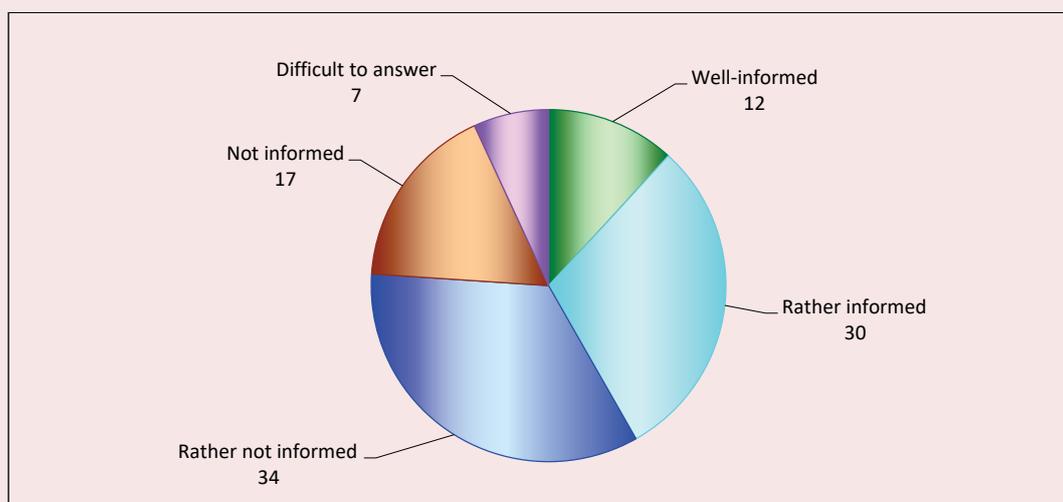
When asked "To what extent were you interested in what is going on in your city?", the majority of respondents answered that they were interested in public events taking place in the city in varying degrees (*Tab. 4*).

At the same time, slightly more than half (51%) of respondents have not heard anything or do not know much about the fact that the priority project "Creating a comfortable urban environment" is being implemented in their city; 42% of respondents noted that they were more or less informed about this project (*Fig. 2*). At the same time, there were no statistically significant differences in this

Table 4. Distribution of answers to the question "To what extent are you interested in what is going on in your city?" ($n = 783$), % of respondents, broken down by city

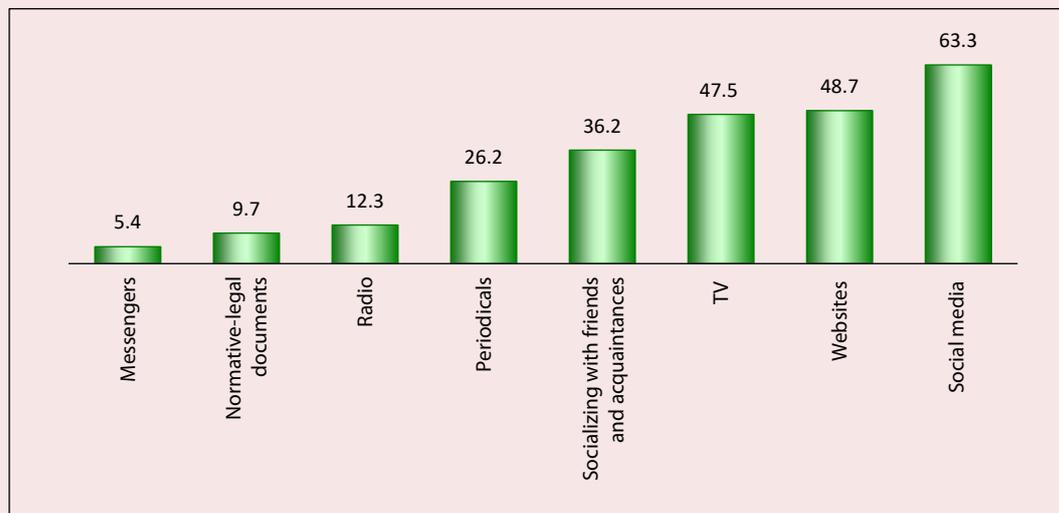
	Arkhangelsk	Severodvinsk	Small towns
I'm trying to stay up to date with all the events	38.3	50.5	36.0
I'm interested in some events	45.7	39.2	43.5
I have little interest in the events	12.3	9.7	17.5
I'm not interested in any events	3.7	0.6	3.0
Source: own research.			

Figure 2. Degree of awareness of respondents about the project "Creating a comfortable urban environment" ($n = 783$), % of the number of respondents



Source: own research.

Figure 3. Main sources of information about the project “Creating a comfortable urban environment” (n = 783), % of the number of respondents*



* Several possible answers were allowed.
Source: own research.

indicator when comparing the results of the survey in Arkhangelsk, Severodvinsk, and small towns.

Those who confirmed at least a minimal degree of awareness about the project implementation named social media (63.3%), specialized Internet sources (48.7%) and television (47.5%; Fig. 3) as the main sources of information about it.

Civic and expert assessment of the quality of the regulatory and organizational foundations necessary for the development of urban space

The interviewed experts from among the civil servants emphasize that according to the effective legal acts, municipal authorities are required to conduct regular information and application campaigns via various communication channels in order to bring up-to-date information to city residents. According to heads of municipalities, the existing methods for informing residents do not require significant changes. The authorities are confident that the residents have sufficient information about the project, and if necessary, they are ready to work individually with applicants: *“All this can be explained. If they want to, they can come to any administration, any senior official will*

explain everything to them personally. But the point is people don’t want to” (Informant 4). However, it seems that the lack of urban residents’ awareness about the project on creating a comfortable urban environment can be explained not only by people’s passivity and their lack of interest in this matter. The fact is that according to legislation there is a strictly regulated procedure for informing city residents about the activities of officials, and communication channels available to residents are reduced to the official media portal of the regional government, traditional mass media, and other similar media. Although their audience is still quite large, we have to admit that nowadays the main operational source of information for citizens is the new media, including social media, which the authorities use unsystematically, or they have narrow coverage of the target audience. For example, the community of the press center of the Government of the Arkhangelsk Oblast in the social media “Vkontakte” has less than 7,000 subscribers and the community “Comfortable urban environment of the Arkhangelsk Oblast” – less than 100 subscribers; the page of the E-government of

the Oblast in the same social media is inactive and is not updated; the main news portal of the city of Arkhangelsk has an audience of more than 20,000 subscribers but it does not have any posts that contain the key words “urban improvement” and “comfortable environment”, and most of the posted information is advertising. This fact is pointed out by experts from non-profit organizations: urban residents are not properly aware of the need to transform urban space, and it is largely the result of a non-systematic approach to informing citizens about the program being implemented and the lack of regular interaction between government and society. According to public activists, bid campaigns are often conducted so as “to observe formalities” and make formal reports on budget spending (Informants 11, 12, 13). In order to make the current situation right, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive “education” of urban residents, which should begin with an explanation of basic concepts: *“Granted, everyone knows that there is such a program, but in general I think they don’t know what a comfortable environment is... probably no one among local residents does”* (Informant 11). *“A comfortable environment is first of all an environment where residents could spend time, that is, it is a courtyard, some kind of public territory where they can come, have a rest, spend their free time, where there may be some activities to engage in... Maybe it’s a garden, a square, or some kind of equipped site for older people... a comfortable environment should be kind of alive...”* (Informant 13).

A significant number of respondents note it is important for ordinary residents to take a proactive position in communication with municipal authorities on the improvement of the urban environment, and that their role should not be reduced to that of passive recipients of official information. When asked “Do you think it is necessary to convey your opinion about the improvement of the urban environment to the administration of your city?” almost 84% gave an affirmative answer (the sum of the answers “yes” and

“sooner yes”) and only 11% answered negatively (the sum of the answers “no” and “sooner no”). At the same time, there were no noticeable differences in the distribution of answers to this question in different cities.

Experts also note the high interest of citizens in urban improvement projects and in the formation of a comfortable environment (Informant 8). However, expressing their interest, urban residents are often not ready to invest their own resources in the implementation of specific projects, for which there is not enough budget funding. The reason lies in the poverty of the population. First of all, this applies to people of retirement age. *“There are houses in which a large number of pensioners live, and they are, so to speak, not ready to co-finance”* (Informant 5). Pointing out that the residents’ interest in urban improvement projects is combined with low initiative when it comes to the project implementation stage, city district leaders emphasized that residents *“do not feel like they are masters of their own land”* (Informant 7); *“The psychology of our residents is that they still mostly cannot renounce the realities of the Soviet era local housing and utilities authorities (“ZhEKs”), they live in memories... They do not understand that they are the owners now”* (Informant 6). It is assumed that the residents themselves must take care of their yard and maintain it in good condition. But, *“... when citizens get into the program, they are very surprised that they are to maintain it”* (Informant 3). As a result, the amount of projects on creating a comfortable urban environment, which have been actually implemented, remains low. For example, in the city of Arkhangelsk, it is necessary to improve about two thousand adjacent territories. During the implementation of the program, 21 courtyards were improved in 2017, 16 – in 2018, and 15 – in 2019 (Informant 8). Another problem, according to experts is the fact that many residents do not realize their unity with the place where they live: home, yard, neighborhood and the city as a whole. The space of the city turns out to be a kind of “forced”

community, within which most people are in a state of social isolation and disunity (Informant 9). People do not associate themselves with the place where they live, and, accordingly, do not want to change anything there (Informants 1, 8).

Speaking about the most preferred channels of feedback with municipal authorities on urban improvement¹² (Fig. 4), the respondents put the media on the first position (54.3%), the city administration website – on the second position (49.5%); the third place was shared by specialized resources for citizens' appeals and initiatives: GIS ZhKKh (state information system for housing and utilities) and the portal "Gosuslugi" (government services) (43.2%), and such a form of direct communication as public mass events: rallies, pickets, and petitions (39.8%)¹³. In terms of the frequency of mentions, the latter option bypassed the reception office of the city administration. This may indicate that public opinion attaches increasingly more importance to collective actions coming from below as an instrument of influence on the municipal government. *"Nothing can be achieved without a dialogue with the urban community that has been already formed in the city; the rallies that we are witnessing prove this"* (Informant 13). At the same time, the mass media is traditionally considered by

the population as a key intermediary in the dialogue between the public and officials. Internet resources with feedback functions are popular among urban residents; it can be explained by the following: wide availability of Internet resources for urban residents in general, increased digital literacy of Russians in recent years, and a relative convenience and simplicity of online services for citizens' requests.

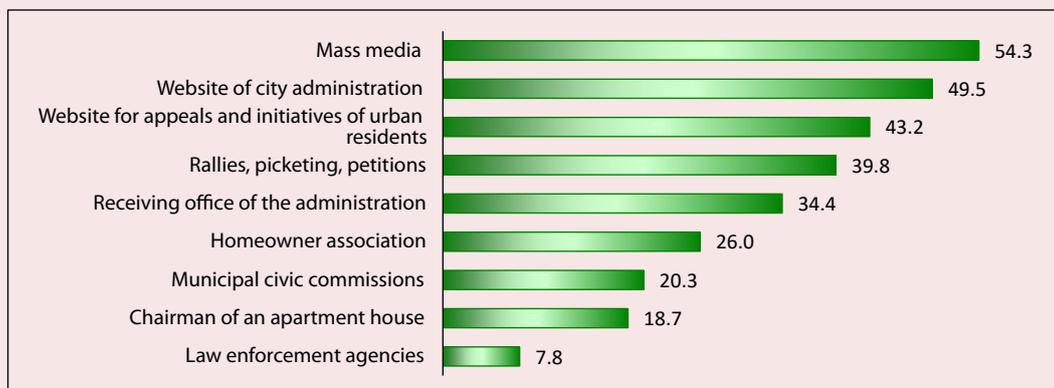
If we consider which channels of communication with the authorities are actually used by urban residents, we see that the distribution of values for this indicator looks somewhat different (Fig. 5). Mass actions and the signing of petitions have become major forms of interaction with the city authorities for citizens who actively broadcast their position on the improvement of urban space (one fifth of respondents). The next three most in-demand communication channels coincide with those that were indicated by respondents as the three most optimal for these purposes. We should also note that every tenth respondent used a representative of a local organization for interaction with municipal services – the chairman of the house council or the property owners' association – as an intermediary in the process of communication with municipal authorities. At the same time, 38.3% of the total number of respondents did not try in any way to convey their opinion on the improvement of the urban environment to the authorized bodies¹⁴.

¹² The question was formulated as follows: "Which of the following can urban residents use for conveying their opinion about the improvement of the urban environment to the city administration?"

¹³ Having compared the distribution of opinions broken down by city, we observe statistically significant differences in the options "Website for urban residents' appeals and initiatives", "Mass media", "Rallies, picketing, petitions" (the differences were identified with the use of the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test for independent samples). Options 1 and 3 are the most interesting to interpret. Speaking about a special website (GIS ZhKKh, Gosuslugi), Arkhangelsk and Severodvinsk are markedly different from single-industry towns: if in the largest cities of the region almost half of residents pointed them out, then in single-industry towns – a little more than one third. The contrast with regard to the answer "Rallies, picketing and petitions" is even more striking: this communication channel was chosen by almost half of the population in Severodvinsk (48.6%), the figure is slightly lower in Arkhangelsk (40.2%), as for single-industry towns, this option was marked by only a quarter of their population (26.4%).

¹⁴ Statistically significant differences between samples from different cities (the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test was used) were identified for the following options: "Mass media" (residents of the regional center are half as likely to choose the media as a channel of communication with the local government), "Rallies, picketing, petitions" (in single-industry towns, this form of communication is used much less often than in large cities; in Severodvinsk, this indicator is the highest), "Homeowners association" and "Chairman of an apartment building" are twice as often mentioned by Arkhangelsk residents compared to those of Severodvinsk. It is important to note that the share of those who take a passive civic position (who do not try to convey their opinion on the formation of a comfortable urban environment to local governments) is 10% higher in single-industry towns compared to Arkhangelsk and Severodvinsk.

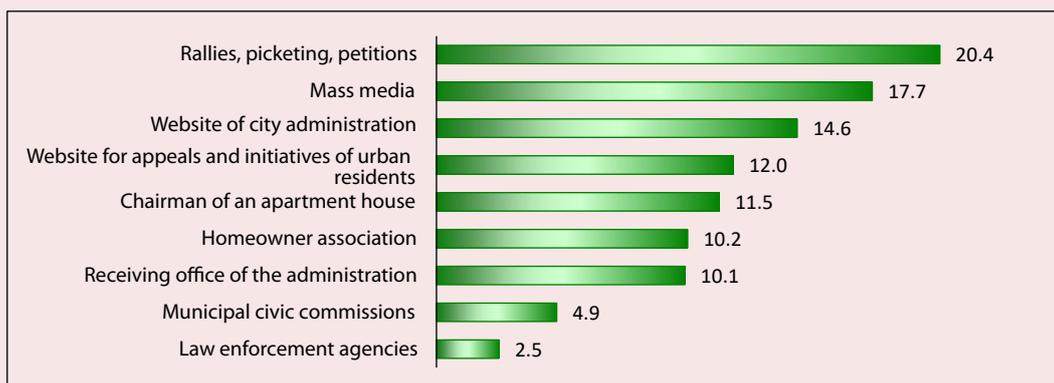
Figure 4. The most convenient channels of communication with local governments on the improvement of the urban environment, according to respondents (n = 783), % of the number of respondents*



* Several possible answers were allowed.

Source: own research.

Figure 5. Main channels that respondents use for communication with municipal authorities on urban improvement issues (n = 783), % of the number of respondents*



* Several possible answers were allowed.

Source: own research.

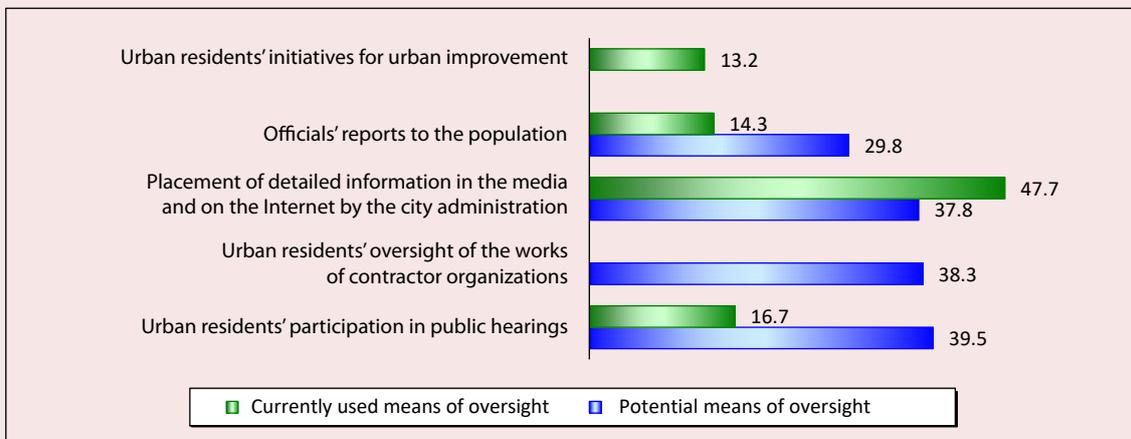
We were also interested in the opinion of residents of the surveyed cities regarding what means are available to them for the purpose of monitoring the activities of city administrations in the implementation of measures to create a comfortable urban environment – both potentially applicable measures and those that respondents applied in practice. The distribution of answers is shown in *Figure 6*.

Despite the fact that respondents approximately equally assess the importance of various mechanisms for monitoring the activities of municipal

authorities, in fact, they use mainly passive forms associated with obtaining information in the form of journalistic materials, blog entries and official documents (in total – 62%). Only about 30% indicated they had actually participated in active forms of monitoring, such as public hearings. At that, 38.4% of respondents said that in general they did not try to monitor the activities of local authorities.

The main forms of residents' engagement in the assessment of the state of the urban environment are related to their participation in public opinion polls

Figure 6. Means of monitoring the actions of local authorities to improve the urban environment: potential and actually used by respondents (n = 783), % of the number of respondents*



* Several possible answers were allowed.
Source: own research.

and meetings of homeowners, so they are not related to their own initiative or are related to specific issues of improvement of house territories that are outside the framework of public communication in the system of “power–public” relations. At the same time, from one third (in the regional center) to 44% (in single-industry towns) of urban residents are not involved in the assessment of the state of urban space (Tab. 5).

Despite the fact that urban residents mostly use passive forms of participation in the monitoring and assessment of the activities of municipal authorities in the sphere of urban improvement, and also despite the presence of a high percentage of those who are not engaged in the monitoring and assessment (especially in small towns) at all, the

survey showed high readiness of northerners to participate in the development of projects to create a comfortable urban environment (Fig. 7).

Discussion of the results

The results of the mass survey show that despite the high percentage of urban residents who are generally satisfied with living in their city, the share of those who consider that urban space requires improvement exceeds two-thirds of the total number of respondents. The main factor influencing this distribution of opinions is the dissatisfaction of residents with the policy of municipal authorities in the field of urban improvement.

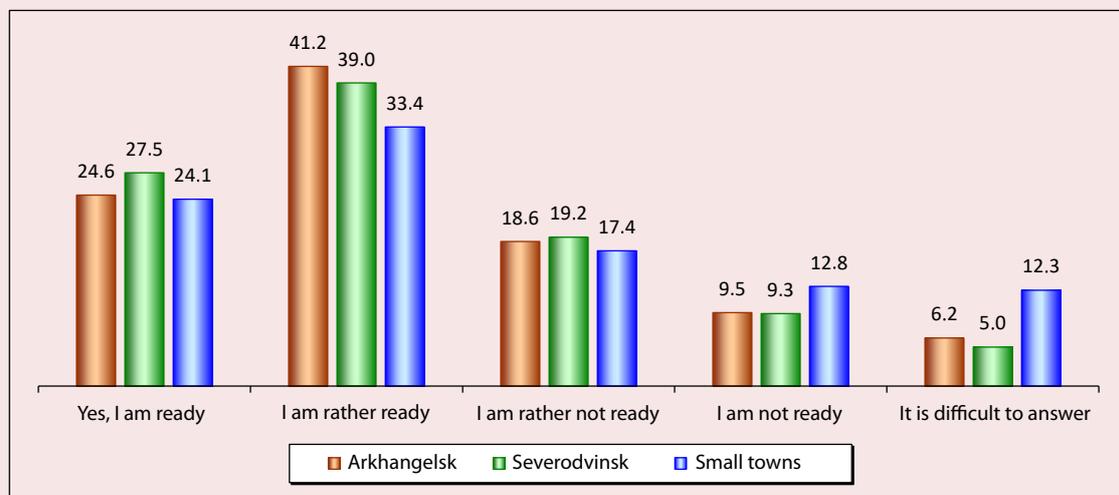
The vast majority of respondents showed active interest in the events taking place in the city. At the same time, less than half are somewhat

Table 5. Forms of participation of respondents in the assessment of the urban environment (n = 783; multiple answers were allowed), % of respondents, broken down by city

Form of participation	Arkhangelsk	Severodvinsk	Small towns
Participation in public discussion	11.9	21.8	9.2
Participation in a questionnaire or interview	47.2	41.8	41.1
My child (or younger brother/sister) participated in school projects on a similar topic	11.4	11.8	11.8
Meeting of homeowners	29.2	19.9	16.6
Did not participate in any way	34.4	41.6	44.0

Source: own research.

Figure 7. Readiness of urban residents to participate in the development of projects to create a comfortable urban environment (n = 783), % of the number of respondents, broken down by city



familiar with the content of the “Comfortable urban environment” project (only 12% consider themselves well-informed in this matter). This fact suggests not only that information about the project is disseminated with the use of inefficient means, but also that the very presentation of information does not convince urban residents of the fact that the implementation of the project is a socially and individually significant event.

Respondents agree that it is important to engage in communication with municipal authorities on the improvement of urban spaces and express their readiness to participate in the development and implementation of relevant projects. However, the actual degree of participation of urban residents in public communication with municipal authorities, as well as in the monitoring and evaluation of proposed and implemented projects, is noticeably lower. At the same time, the prevailing forms of urban residents’ participation in the monitoring and evaluation of projects can be characterized as passive: they are not related to the initiative of the residents themselves (for example, involving them in public opinion polls); they are manifested in getting acquainted with official information on the improvement of the urban environment, published

in the media and in various Internet resources. Despite the fact that Russians admit the importance of civic participation, in the course of over 30 years they have not yet developed a firm belief in the possibility and success of such participation (especially in the regions).

Speaking about active forms of civic engagement, respondents prefer direct actions (rallies, picketing, petitions) and show less interest in more formalized feedback channels like public hearings, reception office of the city administration, or specialized Internet services for citizens to get in touch with the authorities. This fact is probably due to the increased protest activity in the cities of the Arkhangelsk Oblast (in connection with environmental issues), which resulted from the lack of opportunities to achieve the implementation of their interests with the help of administrative means.

However, according to representatives of state and municipal authorities, residents of the Arkhangelsk Oblast are interested in participating in the formation of a comfortable urban environment, but show low activity due to their reluctance to co-finance the proposed projects and the need to fill in a large set of documents for submitting

an application. Public figures attribute the inefficiency of the federal program to a formal approach to informing and involving residents in the implementation of projects aimed at creating a well-maintained urban environment; such an approach impedes correct understanding of the comfort of urban space. Urban residents participate in the implementation of the program in accordance with their needs, but they may be disappointed by the low level of response of the state administration system to their requests, and they are not satisfied with the stereotyped and standard approach in the implementation of projects. In addition, we should not forget that often Russian citizens do not firmly believe that they are the owners in the city, and they do not relate themselves with a specific place of residence. Perhaps this is a legacy of the Soviet past, in which the system of municipal government acted differently, and an urban resident could be moved to another place of residence for various reasons. At the same time, urban residents have not acquired the necessary resources (appropriate competencies and available financial means) to participate more actively in urban improvement and placemaking.

Thus, we can point out the main contradictions in the implementation of the “Comfortable Urban Environment” project. Providing urban residents with information does not create an image of a personally significant project for them. Urban residents do not have the proper experience of successful participation in addressing urban issues, and this fact sometimes forces them to resort to protest activity. Residents of Russian cities have not yet realized that they are the owners of urban space, they do not have the proper competencies and finances. The authorities are often not ready to act in a new way, handing the initiative to improve the urban space over to the residents.

Conclusion

Thus, at the present stage of the implementation of the program for the formation of a comfortable urban environment, the civic activity of urban

residents as an activity aimed at satisfying socially significant interests remains low. The main reasons for this are the formal approach of municipal authorities to informing and engaging citizens in the implementation of urban space improvement projects, on the one hand, and the passivity of the residents themselves, on the other. The latter is largely due to the lack of understanding of the fundamental principles of the program, according to which citizens themselves should take the initiative and be responsible for it. The efforts undertaken by city authorities are more demonstrative than instrumental, and cause residents to feel distrust of their activities.

The results of our study are of practical significance, because they can be used to improve urban governance. With the help of public communications, municipal authorities should involve citizens in the decision-making system on the development of urban space. Achieve this goal, it is necessary for municipalities to create civic oversight bodies representing the urban community; these bodies would be responsible for urban improvement projects. A wide range of communication tools should be used to inform urban residents. It is also important to increase the level of competence of municipal officials and citizens. It is necessary to eliminate mutual distrust between the urban community and municipal authorities through the successful implementation of joint projects. Taking into account the obvious potential for civic engagement among urban residents, we believe it is necessary to review the existing forms and tools of interaction between government and society on creating a comfortable urban space and develop a descriptive model that in the future will allow urban residents to be involved to the full extent in the implementation of the federal program and raise the level of civic engagement. The empirical basis for constructing such a model is largely formed on the basis of the data obtained through the sociological tools we have developed. Although they were originally created

to identify the opinions of the public and experts used in other constituent entities of the Russian Federation when conducting similar sociological studies.

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Information about the Authors

Anton M. Maksimov – Candidate of Sciences (Politics), Associate Professor, Senior Researcher, N. Laverov Federal Center for Integrated Arctic Research of the Russian Academy of Sciences (23, Severnaya Dvina Embankment, Arkhangelsk 163000, Russian Federation; e-mail: a.maksimov@fciaarctic.ru)

Marina V. Nenasheva – Candidate of Sciences (Philosophy), Associate Professor, Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov, Higher School of Social Sciences, Humanities and International Communication (17, Severnaya Dvina Embankment, Arkhangelsk, 163000, Russian Federation; e-mail: m.nenasheva@yandex.ru)

Il'ya F. Vereshchagin – Candidate of Sciences (History), Deputy Head of Department, Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov (17, Severnaya Dvina Embankment, Arkhangelsk, 163000, Russian Federation; e-mail: i.vereschagin@narfu.ru)

Tat'yana F. Shubina – Candidate of Sciences (Philosophy), Associate Professor, Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov (17, Severnaya Dvina Embankment, Arkhangelsk, 163000, Russian Federation; e-mail: t.shubina@narfu.ru)

Polina V. Shubina – Candidate of Sciences (Philosophy), Associate Professor, Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov (17, Severnaya Dvina Embankment, Arkhangelsk, 163000, Russian Federation; e-mail: p.shubina@narfu.ru)

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