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Public Participation Practices in Political Life in the Russian Regions

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Abstract

The article discusses the problem of public participation of the population in the political life of the country. The object of research becomes one of the forms of public participation: people examination. People examination is understood by the authors as an expert opinion initiated by the public, carried out by professionals, conducted in the interests of the people as a whole or of certain social groups, and resulting in the submission of a reasoned conclusion with recommendations for decision-makers. The study of the specifics of the people examination use as an effective public practice was carried out on the basis of the evaluation of the success of the "People examination" project using mass and expert surveys to determine the potential for participation of the population and professional experts in such projects. The research conducted has shown that at present the opinion of citizens living in a specific territory is not always taken into account fully when solving problems of social and economic development. Despite the interest of residents of Russian regions in such projects, the problems of providing general access, information and obtaining a specific result from people examination, do not provide an opportunity to evaluate it as highly effective.

Keywords: Public participation, People examination, Public administration, Civil control, Crowdsourcing.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of public participation in the political life of the country is exacerbated by the growing complexity of the choice of effective management decisions in the context of a systemic crisis caused by the transition to new socio-economic relations. At the present stage of the development of the Russian state, the stage of its comprehensive reform, the importance of legislative provision and public recognition of ongoing reforms, effective social and legal regulation of social relations grows. In Russia, the process of expanding the expert activity of the population is underway; a mechanism for carrying out people examination is being worked out. These processes are real and are dictated by the need to reduce social risk when making decisions at various levels of public administration to ensure the development of society and the state.

The multidimensionality of the problem under study makes it possible to conditionally divide theoretical and empirical studies on a topic into several groups.

The first group includes works examining the features and practical approaches to carrying out expert review of official documents, including draft laws. The concept of examination from the scientific point of view is most developed in relation to specific areas of human activity, expressing, as a rule, the generic feature of research (medical, judicial, evaluative, and environmental examination).

Increasing the interest of scientists and lawmakers to the problem of the social structures activity in matters of assertion of their rights is quite clearly demonstrated by the example of the gender examination. The subject of the examination was the constitutional, labor, pension, family, and criminal legislation, as well as laws related to the reproductive rights of women [1-3]. In a number of studies, the development of theoretical bases of examination as a civil society institution has been initiated. The concept of "people examination" is considered as a mechanism of social control, as an examination conducted with the participation of public (non-state) structures, examination aimed at identifying the social consequences that have come and are expected.

The second group of studies includes the work of scientists engaged in studying the problems of expert activity as an instrument of social control, as well as social partnership, responsibility of social actors, and formation of anti-corruption mechanisms in the public administration system [4-9].

The third group combines the work in which the examination process is associated with a risk assessment or social impact forecast, with the choice of indicators and criteria for risk assessment, assessment of a hazard (loss, damage) probability, and risk classification [10-12].

In literary sources, there are many different definitions of "public participation". However, recently social scientists tend to the following: public participation is a continuous process of interaction (communication) between a decision-making organization (institution) and citizens whose interests may be affected by the direct or indirect consequences of the planned decision, as well as between citizens and those state bodies that regulate this type of activity.

It should be emphasized for a more complete understanding of the essence of this process that "participation" is a communication process that obeys all the laws of the organization of network communications "from many to many" [13].

Twelve basic principles for organizing public participation include: the existence of a clear goal, alternatives, the provision of complete and reliable information, feedback, training in participation, public participation at the early stages of project preparation, non-discrimination, openness and control of the participatory process, coordination of the process with the project cycle by time, carrying out discussions on the project in a place of its realization in view of local traditions and opportunities of the population for participation, balance of the rights and responsibility, rationality [14].

The Constitution of the Russian Federation gives citizens of the country the right to participate publicly in the management of the state affairs not only through their representatives, but directly. The forms of this participation may be different. However, a special place is occupied by the so-called consulting and expert forms of participation. One of such forms is the people examination [15].

Examination usually refers to a comprehensive study of a problem, process or phenomenon, which requires special knowledge and skills, and ends with the presentation of a reasonable conclusion, including elements of recommendations [16].

In turn, people examination is an expert examination initiated by the public, carried out by professionals, conducted in the interests of the people as a whole or of individual social groups, resulting in the submission of a reasoned conclusion with recommendations for decision-makers. The object of people examination can be a product or service, documentation or activities.

People examination is one of the forms of public participation that can fulfill the following socially important functions:

1. Obtaining comprehensive information about the state of a social problem: its specifics, dynamics, scope, the contribution of various social agents to its solution, the legislative framework, and so on;

2. Obtaining information about the problems and needs of specialists in this field and decision-makers; definition of priorities;
3. Analysis and evaluation of the effectiveness of the activities carried out, both from the point of view of performers and from the position of recipients of social services;
4. Analysis of the effectiveness of interaction between public, state, municipal and business structures in the territory;
5. Forecast of the situation in the near, medium and long term. Identify and search for solutions to existing problems, optimize these solutions, coordinate the interests of the parties. Creation of an atmosphere of trust between public organizations and state structures working in the same sphere.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

The study of the specifics on the use of people examination as an effective public practice was carried out on the basis of the "People examination" project success evaluation, which was launched by the Department of Internal and Personnel Policy of the Belgorod Region, to enable everyone to express their ideas for improving the quality of life in their home town or village and for development of the Russian region.

The project allows collection of the best public ideas and proposals that contribute to solving the actual problems of the region. The aim of the project is to involve residents in the process of generating and discussing ideas, making managerial decisions at the municipal and regional levels. Two information and communication forums have been launched: offline and online to achieve the project's goal.

The offline forum of the project is used in the absence of Internet access. The offline forum includes information boxes of a uniform pattern established in municipalities, which allow organizing the collection of people's initiatives. Another form of functioning of the offline forum is the meetings of heads of administrations of municipal districts and city districts of the region with residents of urban and rural settlements that are conducted with the purpose of actively involving the population in making managerial decisions in all municipalities.

Online forum is an Internet resource being a collection of information and computer programs contained in an information system that ensures the availability of such information on the Internet. The start page of the site is available on the Internet at <http://narod-expert.ru>.

The implementation of the project assumed primarily social effects. The active introduction of the new communication model into the system of socio-political relations made it possible to

realize a number of expectations of individual citizens, society, and the authorities as a whole. Thus, the region's population received a simple and accessible mechanism for identifying and broadly discussing existing problems and options for their solutions. The project forums became a platform for expressing one's own opinion and discussing significant initiatives of the authorities.

Ideas are available for general voting and commenting within 30 days after their publication on the website. The project "People examination" assumes a ranking of the project participants and the rating of ideas.

Ideas that received the most support (10% of ideas in each section) are submitted for examination and evaluation to national and professional experts.

Professional experts take part in expert evaluation of ideas according to the scope of their professional competencies. Experts discuss the possibility and feasibility of implementing an initiative. After the work is finished, experts evaluate each idea according to five standard criteria: relevance, innovation, social significance, economic efficiency, feasibility. The final evaluation of an idea is formed from the sum of the assessments of professional and people experts.

Although more than 15,000 are registered on the project's website and about 2000 ideas were proposed, the involvement of the region's inhabitants in this project is not universal. It is necessary to assess the problems of the project and propose measures for its correction.

The research on the problem of the regional project "People examination", its effectiveness and significance for the population of Russian regions, involves the use of a sociological mass and expert survey of participants in the people examination. In the mass survey, 500 respondents aged between 14 and 49, quoted by sex and age, were interviewed. Respondents included people aged 14-19 - 22%, 20-29 years - 25%, 30-39 years - 30%, 40-49 years - 23%; of them 55% were men, and 45% of them were women.

The expert survey was attended by 30 experts: representatives of public diplomacy, intellectual elite, and members of the public chamber of the region.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents, and participants of the examination, were asked to choose the directions of project ideas, which should be developed first of all in the Russian region. The choice of survey participants was focused on health care projects - 53.6%, education - 26.2%, support

for young families -12.4%, and social security - 7.8 %. Thus, the project priorities of Russians and the problem fields of the social sphere were identified.

Necessity of public control over social welfare institutions was emphasized by 89.8% of respondents. The majority of respondents (37.4%) are ready to participate in social projects to provide targeted assistance. 35.2% are ready to join the promotion of a healthy lifestyle. 23.2% agree to help in the improvement of their city / village. 22.8% of the respondents decide to organize the leisure of the population. 17.2% happy to take part in volunteer work. 16.8% would like to engage in the upbringing and education of children and youth.

Participation in volunteer actions is really important for the residents of the Russian province; this is confirmed by the survey data - 56.6% of respondents realize its importance, and only 4.6% stressed their indifference on this issue. The inhabitants of the Russian regions see the importance of volunteer work as being useful for people - 57.8%, for acquiring new experience - 43.6%, for useful communications - 35.8%, for communicating with interesting people - 36.6%, for participation in public life - 24.2%.

Answers to the question "Do you know about the "People examination" project in the Belgorod region?" were 73.6% - "No", 26.4% - "Yes", and to the question "Did you take part in the "People examination"?" 83.2% were "I do not participate".

Residents who took part in this project stressed that the involvement in it, is an opportunity to benefit their settlement (36.8%), the opportunity to improve the quality of social services (34.2%), the opportunity to find like-minded people to implement their idea / project (23.4%), and the opportunity to gain additional knowledge (17.2%).

Thus, the inadequate involvement of inhabitants of the region in the people examination is due to partial disinterest, awareness problems and, most likely, the unpreparedness of the population for this kind of civil practice.

Conducting an expert survey and assessing a request for examination have found that for 53.84% of experts implementing a civilian examination has a medium level of relevance. High topicality of the civil initiative was stressed by 33.33% of experts. Analysis of the results of the study allows us to propose the need to improve its effectiveness due to the high relevance and importance of the request for its conduct.

Despite the experience of the regions that have embarked on the path of increasing civic engagement, there are a number of problems in the implementation of promising social technologies. Thus, 47.89% of experts who participated in the study in the city believe that the practice of civilian examination in Russia is not developed enough, and 18.31% believe that it is simply not represented as such.

Experts believe that the reason for this pessimistic situation is, first of all, that the public has no clear idea of the content of this activity (40.85%) and the passivity of the population (35.21%). Of course, the respondents also consider the lack of traditions (22.54%), the opposition of officials (21.13%), and the lack of regulatory support (21.13%).

The model of the problem field for the introduction of the practice of civil examination includes the following groups of problems:

- Insufficiently developed legislative base;
- Lack of knowledge and experience in the field of public examination;
- The problem of attracting experts;
- Inability to interact with the media in the field of public examination;
- Insufficient mastery of technologies and forms of involving the community and the people in public examination.

At the same time, experts took the lead on the problems of involvement of the expert community and interaction with the media. And, in addition to the mentioned problem components, the lack of traditions of public participation of citizens in public administration (22.54%) and opposition of officials (21.13%) acquire a large statistical weight.

On the other hand, it allows us to look at the problem of people examination and the experts' answers to the question of the desire to participate in it - so, 22.53% of respondents answered negatively, and 81.69% of them failed to denote the reason for refusing the initiative. The lack of internal motivation, civic position and internal locus of responsibility among the civilian elite in a number of regions and regional areas leads to the impossibility of introducing any promising social innovation. And although 76.06% of experts expressed their willingness to participate in the proposed examination, 73.23% of them do not have experience of such participation.

According to the research, in the experts opinion, the most fruitful and effective is the participation of the population in the work of representative bodies (45.07%) and creation of public councils under executive bodies (42.25%). Experts also consider participation of the residents of the territory in the work of the collegiums at the executive bodies of power (22.54%), conduct of public hearings (26.76%), discussion of problems at sessions of the Public Chamber (29.58%), organization of Internet forums discussing draft decisions and normative acts (35.21%), discussion of draft decisions in the media (28.17%).

In summary, the conducted research on assessment of effectiveness of the people examination practices for residents of the Russian regions showed that at present the opinion of those

living in a specific territory is not always fully taken into account when solving problems of social and economic development. The appearance of a forum on the Internet for expressing the opinion of residents on the most significant problem issues and gathering ideas to improve the quality of life in their native city or village and the development of the entire region as a whole will allow the state and municipal authorities to get a more complete picture of the situation and take into account the opinion of residents in resolving topical problems of the region and its municipalities.

Stimulating the participation of civil society in the process of making managerial decisions presupposes the creation and use of feedback channels from the community and mechanisms for civil participation in the development, monitoring and evaluation of decisions of public authorities.

The "People examination" project was created specifically to meet the public needs for information. Thanks to this project, each person can propose ideas, monitor management activities at the municipal level, point out to problematic situations and seek ways to solve them together with the government.

However, not many know that there are such projects, and cannot affect the fate of their region. And that to increase the effectiveness of the "People examination" it is necessary to increase the radius of awareness for the citizens of the region on the existence of such areas of public communication and integration.

CONCLUSION

The main conclusions of the theoretical and empirical studies carried out are the following positions:

1. The civil examination is an actual practice of public participation of the population in making managerial decisions on the development of a specific territory. The development of this practice and the search for effective methods for its implementation are an important task, since civil examination, as a form of public control, is an important component of a democratic society.
2. Implementation of a civil examination is possible on-line and off-line. The most widespread in the regions of Russia is the use of on-line public participation and control forums that offer the population of the region the opportunity to participate in the evaluation of administrative initiatives or participate in crowdsourcing projects at the territory.

3. Participation in civilian examination projects at the moment is not massive for the regions of Russia - this practice is still becoming an innovative form, and it has a number of problems in its implementation. The main problem of implementation is the low awareness of the population about the possibilities of manifestation of civic solidarity and creativity, disinterest in involvement in such initiatives. The involvement of professional experts to work in these areas is associated with difficulties to stimulate them to perform informal activities.

4. Thus, it can be argued that the introduction of civilian examination technologies in the practice of governance of the Russian regions is at the stage of formation. The main problems that arise upon implementation of such initiatives are primarily related to the unpreparedness of the population to be included in new forms of interaction with the authorities, possibly with distrust of the future result, and suspicion of imitative actions. The way out of the situation can be considered to be explanatory work among the population, publication of the results of public examinations, and possibly, involvement of trade union organizations to the propaganda of this technology.

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