



ARTICLE IN THE SPECIAL SECTION

## Impact of Citizen Participation on Solving the Social Problems of Small Regional Towns in Russia

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### ABSTRACT

The social contradictions of small regional towns in Russia remain a controversial issue. In the official discourse, the proponents of eliminating and consolidating small towns and villages argue their position in terms of the economic efficiency of cost reductions. However, the role and importance of small territories are great as they constitute the country's spatial, mental, and historical basis. This article aims to identify the potential of citizen participation in resolving social contradictions to ensure the sustainability of small towns. In the first stage of the study, a proprietary methodology was proposed for calculating an integral index that aggregates a set of initial statistical indicators of socio-economic development in small towns (the Vologda Oblast), with their subsequent grouping to assess social contradictions. It was established that of 13 small towns in the region, six belong to the group whose level of socio-economic development is below average, six small towns exhibit a low level, and only one town (Kadnikov) is characterized by a high level of development. The lag in terms of indicators relative to average values is a negative factor in the development of small areas, the preservation of their human potential, and the growth of social contradictions. The second stage of the

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study involved identifying the features, factors, and limitations of local community participation (population, business entities, and nonprofit organizations) in solving the problems of small towns in the region by means of a quantitative and qualitative methodological strategy (questionnaire survey of the population in the region,  $N = 1900$ ; focus-group interviews,  $N = 5$ ). The obtained results will serve as the basis for the development of individual trajectories for the development of small areas through the active involvement of the local community in these processes.

**KEYWORDS**

small towns, citizen participation, local community, socio-economic development

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**Introduction**

Among 1,118 cities and towns in the Russian Federation, over 70% are small towns with a population of less than 50 thousand people. They are home to about 12% of the country's population (over 16 million people). However, the historical development of small towns following the collapse of the USSR and socio-economic changes during the transition period led to a wide range of problems. In particular, these are the deterioration of urban infrastructure, the collapse of the labor market, the increase in unemployment, the consequent increase in out-migration, the decline in the level and quality of life, and the rise of social tensions. Under such conditions, the implementation of policies aimed at identifying local problems and activating various sources for their solution is required. In this regard, it is necessary to conduct a scientific search for the driving forces behind the development of small towns. In territorial development, the economic component is unarguably of primary importance; however, the social factor is equally important. The formation, approval, and development of any socio-historical reality is a result of interaction between economic and non-economic, the latter being a powerful human factor of "reverse influence" on the public economy (Gorshkov, 2021). The problem of the study is the discrepancy between the existing potential of citizen participation in small areas' development and the fact that the significance of this intangible resource is not fully recognized by either the population or the state. Consequently, it is insufficiently used in social transformations. Given the relevant role played by intangible factors in territorial development, the present study aims to identify the potential of local community participation in these processes.

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## Theoretical Background

Citizen participation is a concept that is constantly referred to in various disciplines and applies to a wide range of issues, yet its definitions vary widely. For example, Google search reveals approximately 35,500,000 results<sup>1</sup>, indicating that the term is quite widely used. As Ekman and Amnå (2012) rightly point out, a conceptual confusion surrounds this notion: authors use it to denote different things, thereby confusing rather than clarifying the situation. A similar situation can be observed in the Russian research landscape: domestic tradition with the application of Soviet and Western tools has created a terminological confusion that continues to this day (Yanitsky, 2015).

The issue of citizen participation as an internal resource for territorial development was first disseminated in the scientific literature in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century within American urbanism. This period is characterized by accelerated processes of urbanization, industrialization, and development of entrepreneurship, as well as rapid growth of education and communications. These processes manifested themselves to a greater extent in American society than in the Old World countries. In the managerial practice of the 1920–1930s, citizen participation gradually became a tool for reshaping state policies and monopolistic entrepreneurship, which was accordingly reflected in sociological discourse. Against the background of explosive population growth in American cities, Chicago School researchers began to study the involvement of local communities in the socio-economic transformation of the urban environment using the terms “social” and “political participation” for the first time (Park & Thomas, 1927).

Although citizen participation has no universal definition, a literature analysis enabled the identification of its essential characteristics. The study of selected papers and monographs by both foreign and domestic authors shows that citizen participation is mainly interpreted as individual and collective activities aimed at identifying and solving problems of public interest and improving social welfare (Ukhanova, 2020). As a rule, such definitions conceptualize citizen participation in the context of actions taken for the benefit of others while recognizing the possibility of achieving the public good through the implementation of individual and group goals. Despite the great diversity of definitions, common components can be identified: (a) behavioral and value components; (b) citizen component; (c) component of social change and development.

The issue related to the boundaries of citizen participation remains debatable. Initially, the concept was most often used to refer to political activity and various forms of interaction between the public and the state (Berger, 2009). Then, the methodological understanding of citizen participation expanded to include such activities as volunteering and community work (Levasseur et al., 2010). In addition, approaches that encompass not only citizen behaviors and actions but also citizen values, skills and knowledge, and motivational attitudes have developed (Phan & Kloos, 2023). Thus, multidimensional approaches are gradually emerging, in which citizen engagement is about working to make a difference in communities while developing a combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to achieve these changes through both political and non-political processes.

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<sup>1</sup> Google Programmable Search Engine. *Citizen participation*. Retrieved October 27, 2020.

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The combination of the original authors' idea and researchers' positions justifies the relevance of a multidimensional approach that takes into account the role of public participation in solving socially relevant problems both in interaction with the authorities (socio-political space) and in the horizontal space of everyday life (socio-economic space). In addition, within the multidimensional approach, we consider the value-based (teleological) aspect of participation determined by value-based attitudes, cultural stereotypes and norms, which allows us to consider the role of citizen participation in the socio-cultural space.

In the research field, the most important issue is to identify the effects (performance) of citizen participation in social development rather than the development level of its individual indicators. We understand social development as a process of the positive development of societies (societal systems), various spheres of social life, social structures, and relations, as well as the creative opportunities and potential of a person within a certain period of time (Chuprov, 2003).

In this study, the effects of vertical and horizontal interactions in the context of citizen participation are considered in the socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural spheres within the integral concept of social development. We assume that the conditions for expanding the opportunities to meet the diverse needs and interests of the regional population (material, social, spiritual, etc.) are created through citizen participation as an intangible resource for regional self-development. Accordingly, a general increase can be observed in the performance, efficiency, and competitiveness of the regional space, as well as its structural complexity as an object of social development.

Scientists have shown that engaged public participation enhances policy legitimacy and accountability (Cornwall, 2008), empowerment of participatory actors (Okali et al., 1994), social learning (Blackstock et al., 2007), and social benefits (increase of social and human potential). Considerably less research has focused on the material benefits of participation: in particular, it has been recognized that participation can shift the cost burden from the state to local resident volunteers (Hallett, 1987). Apart from the positive evaluation of participation, critical approaches are also found in the academic discourse: participation, cooperation, and effectiveness can be contrasted and pretended participation can occur (Musch & von Streit, 2020).

We believe that despite the complexity of measurement, issues related to both the tangible and intangible effects of local participation in solving social problems deserve special attention in the research discourse as they help to gain a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of these processes.

## **Analysis Methods and Database**

The assessment of contradictions is particularly relevant. For this purpose, we chose the methodology for assessing the socio-economic development of urban agglomerations (Voroshilov, 2021). The methodological toolkit was adjusted to calculate the integral index of socio-economic development in small towns that aggregates the initial statistical indicators, with their subsequent grouping.

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Using available official statistical data provided by Rosstat [Federal State Statistics Service] (n.d.), we created a list of indicators reflecting various aspects of the socio-economic development of small territories. Then, on the basis of comparability and proportionality of indicators, we standardized the indicators relative to the average values by bringing the cost indicators to the uniform average Russian prices. Finally, we calculated the integral indicator of socio-economic development in small towns and grouped them on this basis.

The sociological approach shows promise for a comprehensive analysis of public participation in solving the social problems of small towns. This approach reveals the possibilities of studying the participation of citizens, their groups and associations as an intangible resource for social development in the context of the socio-economic, socio-political, and socio-cultural dynamics of Russian society at the regional level, which constitutes an integral part of the holistic analysis of society as a complex hierarchical system. The sociological approach allows us to analyze public and expert opinion on the state and role of citizen participation in social development, the peculiarities of civic practices, and the value orientations of citizens.

We applied the strategy of mixed methods research, which is based on the principles of quantitative and qualitative sociology. On the first stage, we conducted a public opinion poll organized by the Vologda Research Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences (VoIRC RAS) in small towns of the Vologda Oblast ( $N = 1,900$ ) in 2022. The sampling of respondents was based on territorial stratification: the first stage involved the selection of regional administrative districts according to the level of socio-economic development; the second stage, electoral districts; the third stage, households via the route method. The selection of respondents in a household was carried out using quotas by sex and age (linkage quota). Thus, the database is a sample representing the population of the Vologda Oblast from the age of 18 and older in terms of municipalities, sex, age, and the type of settlement. The sampling error does not exceed 3%. The survey was conducted using a formalized questionnaire at the place of the respondents' residence. Data was processed using the statistical software IBM SPSS, version 25 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The techniques for constructing and analyzing linear (univariate) and paired (bivariate) frequency distributions and tables were used. The paired (bivariate) frequency distributions are based on the assessment (comparison) of the effects of population participation among those who seldom (1–3 points on a 10-point scale) and often (7–10 points) participate in public life. The scores are determined by asking the following question: "On a 10-point scale, how actively do you participate in the development of your community (yard, village, town, and region)?"

In the second stage, we conducted interviews with representatives of government, business, "third sector," media, science, as well as experts and civic activists ( $N = 47$ ) in order to identify opportunities for citizen participation in the development of small towns in the region. Thus, the methodology of sequential contributions is adopted; it implies two stages of research, which enables data continuity: the results of one method serve as input data for the next method. According to Morgan (2014), this is the most productive approach to integrating qualitative and quantitative research findings, although it involves greater time, financial, or human resource costs.

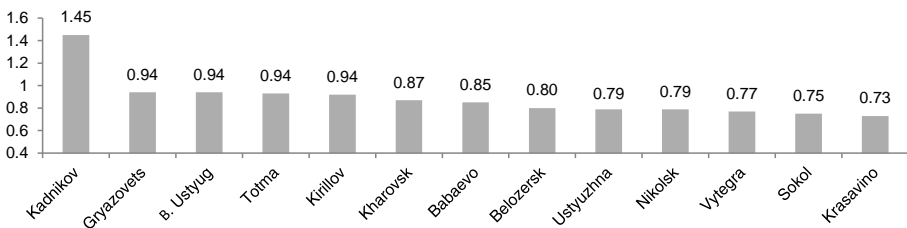
## Results and Discussion

The calculations of the integral index of socio-economic development in the small towns in the Vologda Oblast performed on the basis of the proprietary methodology revealed several problems: a decrease in the population (by 16.5% in 1990–2021); a decline in the level of public health services (the number of hospital beds decreased by 47%; the number of average medical beds, by 16.3%); a reduction in cargo turnover (by 8.2%) and passenger turnover (by 72.7%), etc.

Of 13 small towns in the region, six belong to the group whose level of socio-economic development is below average ( $0.85 \leq I_{\text{dev.lev.}} < 0.95$ ), six small towns exhibit a low level ( $I_{\text{dev.lev.}} < 0.85$ ), and only one town, Kadnikov, is characterized by a high level of development ( $I_{\text{dev.lev.}} \geq 1.15$ ; see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Socio-Economic Development of Small Towns in the Vologda Oblast for 2021*



The standardized indicators calculated relative to the average Russian price level allow us to identify the most problematic areas of development in each town. It was revealed that the main Achilles' heel of small towns that fall into the low development group in the Vologda Oblast is a small amount of investment in fixed capital from municipal funds, as in the towns of Krasavino and Sokol, a low level of local budget revenues in the town of Krasavino, and an insignificant number of children and youth attending sports schools per 1,000 residents, e.g., in the town of Sokol (Kopytova, 2023).

Of note is that investment from municipal funds in Kadnikov is also at a low level; however, as of 2021, it ranks highest among small towns in the region in terms of socio-economic development due to the high number of sports facilities per 1,000 residents.

None of the small towns of the Vologda Oblast fell into the group of above-average and average development levels.

In some small towns, e.g., the town of Vytegra, a factor reflecting the number of healthcare organizations affects their lag in all the studied areas. The lowest standardized birth rates relative to the average indicator are recorded in Kadnikov and Krasavino.

The lag in indicators relative to the average values constitutes an obstacle to their further development. In addition, small towns currently face a range of problems, the most significant of which are the contradictions in the population

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structure and large-scale out-migration; a drop in natural growth; increased expenditures on infrastructure maintenance; concentration of the main economic growth in several large centers of the country; development of innovative economy primarily in large agglomerations; low transport accessibility of areas, etc. (Markin & Chernysh, 2019, p. 216).

Noteworthy is that the increase in the development of small towns largely depends on the participation of local communities in regional development, as well as on the state policy of the country and regions. To study this issue, a questionnaire survey was conducted in the Vologda Oblast in 2022. For an in-depth understanding of the issue, a thematic analysis of the materials of expert and in-depth interviews was also used.

### ***Role of Citizen Participation in Developing the Socio-Political Space of Small Towns***

One of the main functions of political citizen participation is its ability to act as a feedback mechanism, ensuring the communication of ideas to political institutions. In other words, this activity is aimed at direct or indirect policy-making at different government levels. The mechanisms involved in the implementation of citizen participation provide a means to adjust, modify, and change institutional forms, programs, and rules in such a way that they correspond to the interests of the population.

The very fact of citizen participation, regardless of the effect of interaction with the authorities that create institutional opportunities or restrictions for participation, generally has a more positive impact on the perception of the involved party than alienation and refusal to interact, which leads to tension in society: “Instead of doing something, deciding, or participating, they lie on the couch and curse the authorities, and that’s bad” (Expert 6; Trans. by Yulia Ukhanova, Ekaterina Kopytova, & Sergei Zhestyannikov—Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.).

The survey data show that the effects of citizen participation on transformations at the level of the yard, city, region, etc. are manifested in the socio-political space in the formation of a civically responsible community as a subject able to influence the state of affairs in the immediate and distant environment. The majority of Vologda Oblast residents are convinced that they are able to influence the state of affairs in the family, and the proportion of such assessments is approximately the same in both studied groups (84–87%; see Table 1). Among the active residents, positive opinions about the effect on the state of affairs in other spheres are more widespread as compared to the passive locals: at work (57% vs. 43%), in the yard (39% vs. 22%), in the locality (23% vs. 8%), and in the region and country (16% vs. 6%). In general, the obtained data shows that with increasing social distance, people become less aware of the possibility to influence society, regardless of the degree of participation in public life.

**Table 1**

*Estimates of Civic Impact Depending on the Degree of Participation in Socially Useful Activities, in %*

Indicators	In your opinion, do you personally influence the state of affairs in these spheres today?					
	Your family	Your workplace	Your house, yard	Your village, town, city, district	Your region, country	
How actively do you participate in the development of your community?	seldom*	86.6	42.6	22.2	7.6	5.6
	often	83.5	56.7	38.8	23.0	16.1

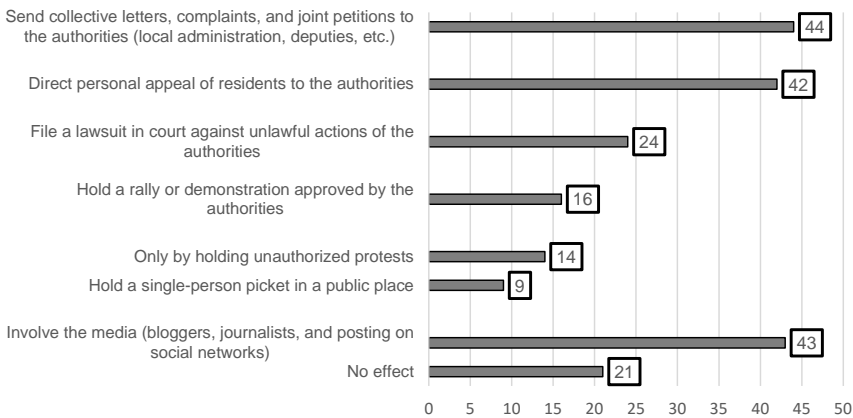
*Note.* \*Henceforth the degree of participation in socially useful activities is assessed on a 10-point scale, according to which the indicators “seldom” and “often” are assigned from 1 to 3 points and from 7 to 10 points, respectively. The scores are determined by asking the question: “On a 10-point scale, how actively do you participate in the development of your community (yard, village, city, and region)?”

Source: Data of VoIRC RAS sociological survey, 2022, Vologda Oblast.

As ways to effectively influence local authorities, the population prefers direct dialog with local authorities, as well as attracting media attention. For instance, the share of positive responses to personal appeals of residents to the authorities averaged 47% across the regions; collective letters and complaints made up 45%, involvement of bloggers, journalists, and posting on social networks comprised 41% (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*People’s Assessments of Ways to Influence Local Authorities Effectively, in % for Each Judgment*



Mass actions such as demonstrations, rallies, and protests coordinated with the authorities are significantly less popular in all of the studied regions. Given this, we can conclude that in the political space, citizen participation is mostly related to making appeals to the authorities. Among the political institutions of the unitary system dominating in Russia, it is this institution that performs feedback functions. As Kirdina (2012) rightly notes, appeals to the hierarchical levels of political structure that are involved in the process of governance and fulfillment of the necessary control functions can serve as one of the most important forms of citizen participation in Russia.



The expert survey revealed that the level of citizen participation has been noticeably increasing in recent years, as stated by representatives of the authorities:

In the last 5–7 years, the population has become more active; they respond to any requests from executive authorities. (Expert 31; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

However, this process does not develop only in a positive context. The following opinion was expressed during the interview:

The most active people are those who are dissatisfied with something. And when it is necessary to support a good idea, everyone scatters. There is very little activity in this respect. (Expert 3; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

People try to solve this problem exclusively by complaining either to the authorities or to the supervising bodies. They write to newspapers and blogs. (Expert 27; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

Thus, we have revealed the ambiguous position on assessing the effects of such a form of citizen participation in the political space as public opinion and control. On the one hand, this format of participation does not imply creative activity or altruistic aspirations; on the other hand, it is one of the ways to defend public rights and interests as an alternative to protest participation.

Sociological data show that people do not consider protests to be an effective way of vertical interaction (society–government) regardless of their involvement in citizen participation practices. Among the actors involved in socially useful activities, the proportion of those who consider non-conventional practices of citizen participation an effective way to solve socially significant problems is smaller: 11% of respondents who often participate in the life of the community agree that unauthorized protests are effective in influencing the authorities; the contrary opinion is shared by 87% of respondents, while among those who seldom participate in public life, these indicators amounted to 29% and 71% (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Population’s Effectiveness Assessment of Unauthorized Protests Depending on the Degree of Participation in Socially Useful Activities, in %*

Indicators	Do you consider participation in unauthorized protests an effective way to influence the authorities?		
	Yes, I do	No, I don’t	
How actively do you participate in the development of your community?	seldom	29	71
	often	11.4	88.6

Note. Source: Data of VolIRC RAS sociological survey, 2022, Vologda Oblast.

The qualitative research also convincingly shows that the active participation of the population in solving social problems creates an opportunity for a dialog between the public and the authorities:

The more active citizens are, the better the authorities hear them and fulfill their needs, the more productive and faster the problems are solved on the ground. (Expert 25; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

According to experts, local residents and authorities currently have enough institutional opportunities to work together:

There are many different programs that involve citizens, so every opportunity for dialogue has been created and many citizens actively exercise this right. (Expert 36; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

Community participation in solving the social issues of the territory is possible both individually and in the form of public associations. The impact of citizen participation on territorial development becomes possible due to the developed mechanisms: in particular, programs to support local initiatives, projects of co-participation in the creation of a comfortable urban environment, etc. Experts note the ability of initiative groups and public associations to effectively interact with the authorities at regional and municipal levels:

The public can communicate certain ideas to the authorities and local self-government bodies quite effectively today; and these ideas can be implemented. (Expert 4; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

If the authorities realize that the people need them, the people support them and communicate what they need, and when there is interaction and discussion between them, when people agree, then, I think, the most comfortable environment is created in the city and in the district. (Expert 35; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

Despite the difficulties in building public-state interaction, the study revealed examples of quite effective cooperation between the authorities and public activists in solving significant local problems. In addition, the actions of government representatives lead to citizens becoming more consciously involved in socially useful activities:

After a new pond was built on an abandoned plot of land in the town of Sokol on the initiative of the city manager and with the support of industrial enterprises, people came forward with an initiative to plant trees; then, the city manager found funds and built a bridge and pavilions. As a result, the neglected site turned into a place of recreation. (Expert 27; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

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Despite the preference for offline formats (as identified above), the active use of information resources is timely for the development of regional citizen participation. According to Vladimir Petukhov, online participation gives impetus to a large number of civic initiatives that move from a virtual space to the real world, reveals the response of the authorities to significant problems, and makes them listen to public opinion (Petukhov, 2022). The study indicates the increasing influence of the Internet as a way to communicate and receive news, which determines the significance of the public potential of Internet resources.

During the interview, most experts noted the importance of Internet technologies as a factor in the effective interaction between society and the authorities. The conditions faced by the regions during the coronavirus pandemic forced both the authorities and public activists to use online resources. According to the experts, civic activity in social networks is higher than in any other format. Communities are created that shape the agenda:

Authorities cannot ignore such things; they must cooperate with them [community members], answer their questions, respond to their problems. With regard to the current area of work, we note that 98% of all citizens' appeals that we receive are appeals in social networks. Work with civic activism shifts to the virtual world. (Expert 4; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

According to the activists, "all local self-government bodies and executive authorities should be active in social networks." (Expert 45; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

Another important way for citizens to participate using Internet technologies is through special services for citizen appeals to government representatives:

We regularly conduct polls and voting there. In particular, now we are discussing the issues of economic development of the city until 2025. (Expert 37; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

However, the availability of such services or the presence of authorities in social networks does not guarantee the effective use of these resources since

communication with the authorities is purely formal here. The head of a structural unit does not answer you, a statistician does. He has a set of phrases that he knows. There is no direct communication in the online space. (Expert 27; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

Regional Internet platforms are becoming a valuable resource for increasing social potential; this trend is most noticeable among young people, while the effects of online participation among the elderly population are also evident:

Sometimes you realize that one broadcast on a topic gathers much more young people to participate in a cause or event than if you did that in person. (Expert 5; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

We have a VK<sup>2</sup> group where elderly people actively follow all the news, observe life in our region and in the other regions. (Expert 34; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

Another important positive effect of Internet technology is the increase in the financial activity of citizens. Online platforms simplify the mechanism of fundraising:

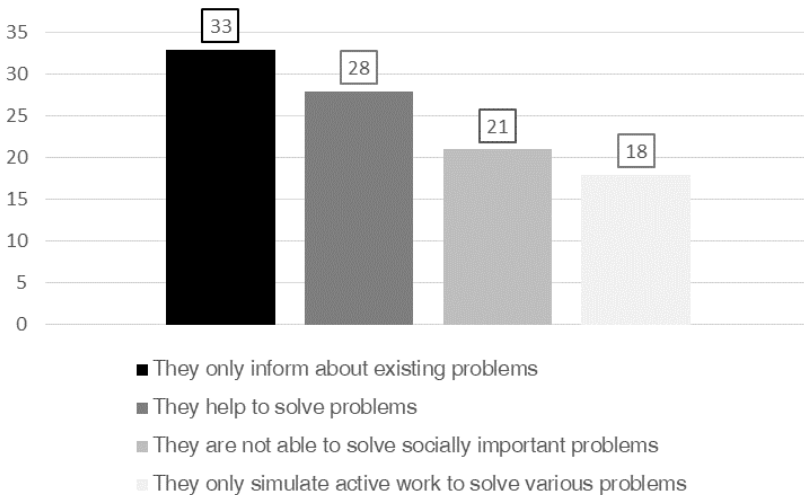
People have become more active, that is, we have started to collect more funds online than before. (Expert 42; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

When they transfer their fifty rubles to help children, the elderly, animals, it does not matter to whom, they are already helping. So, this is their civic activity. (Expert 45; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

In the surveyed regions, a third (33%) of respondents believe that online forms of citizen participation primarily inform about existing problems (Figure 3). A less popular view is that online formats help to solve problems, as well as inform about them (28%). Every fifth person believes that online forms are not able to solve socially significant problems (21%), and 18% are convinced that they only imitate activity without any real positive effect. The territorial community as a whole has not yet decided to assess the effectiveness of the online forms of citizen participation, which may be due to their “novelty.”

**Figure 3**

*People’s Effectiveness Assessment of Online Citizen Participation Forms (in % of the Number of Respondents)*



*Note.* Response to the question “What role does online participation play in the development of your town?”  
Source: Data of VolIRC RAS sociological survey, 2022, Vologda Oblast.

<sup>2</sup> VK (short for its original name VKontakte) is a Russian online social media and social networking service. <https://vk.com> VK™ is a trademark of VK.com Ltd.

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The scientific discourse proves that only the first three stages of citizen participation (according to Arnstein's approach) are implemented in vertical interaction on a large scale: informing, consulting, and appeasement, where citizens can listen and be heard, have the right to a deliberative voice, while the authorities retains the right to make decisions. Other stages of citizen participation such as partnership, delegation, and control, are not fully realized (Arnstein, 1969; Smoleva, 2021). The conducted sociological study shows that the partnership type of relations between the state and the public is gradually developing on the ground, with citizen participation acting as a key method for renewing and strengthening such relations.

We believe that under current conditions, the best option for Russia is joint participation in solving the urgent problems of the local community and the authorities, while the task of the latter is to promote the population's involvement in public affairs. We share the opinion of Yakimets and Nikovskaya (2019) that the establishment of a democratic order cannot only be the result of "live creativity of masses from below" as it involves various forms of public-private partnership.

The effects of citizen participation are manifested in the socio-economic sphere, primarily in the implementation of social policy, which, according to Grigoryeva (2011), is a field of interaction between the main actors, which are the state, business, nonprofit organizations, and the local population. The transition from the "welfare state" to the "welfare society" in Russia is associated with an increased role of civil society in social policy.

With the limited capacity of state institutions and the economy to meet a wide range of public needs ("government failure" and "market failure" theories), it is nonprofit organizations that can help (Kosygina, 2018):

NPOs need to develop in those sectors that are supported by the state and business through grants, subsidies, sponsorship, and donations from legal entities and citizens since they need funding sources. Activity areas arise from the possibility of obtaining funding. And state subsidies and grants are given in those areas that are prioritized by the state in a given locality. (Expert 1; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

Traditionally, there is a high demand for citizen participation in socially oriented activities:

It is also evident from the presidential grant competition. The largest number of applications submitted and supported is in the field of social assistance and social services. We see the demand for these services. This is work with people with disabilities and work to prevent child abandonment. These areas are the most in-demand. (Expert 2; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

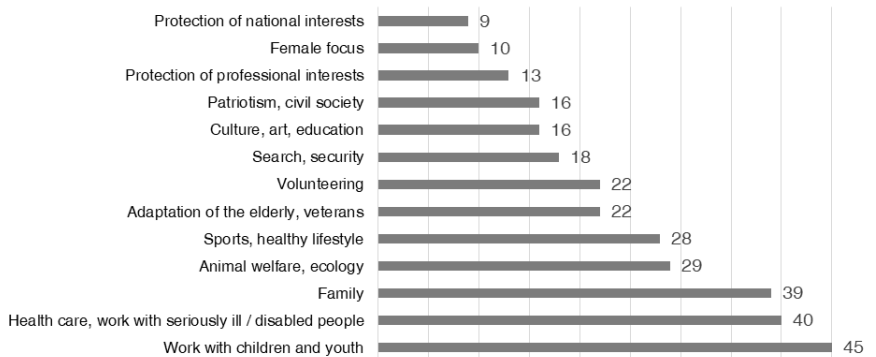
We can generally agree with the conclusions of Mersianova and Jakobson (2011) that even under the current conditions, which are far from ideal, non-state nonprofit initiatives often exhibit high efficiency in those areas where the work of state and municipal institutions gives rise to fair complaints.

The role of citizen participation in the transformation of social and economic institutions, in the increase of living standards and the well-being of the population is manifested not only in creating public organizations but also in self-organization at the place where problems arise and in informal socially useful activities. However, the analysis of interviews with activists suggests that this informal participation is often involuntary, resulting from the oversights of municipal authorities.

The sociological study revealed the areas where the contribution of civic initiatives is assessed to be higher in the regions. These are work with children and youth (average value for small towns in the region is 45%); health care development, including work with the seriously ill (40%); work with families (39%); the protection of nature, including homeless animals (29%); sports development and promotion of a healthy lifestyle (28%; see Figure 4).

#### Figure 4

*People's Assessments of the Role of Citizen Participation by Areas (in % for Each Judgment)*



*Note.* Response to the question “In what areas, in your opinion, is the role of citizen participation in solving important public problems most noticeable?” Source: Data of VoIRC RAS sociological survey, 2022, Vologda Oblast.

One of the priority areas of community participation in overcoming the social contradictions of small towns in the region involves improving the place of residence. As noted by government representatives in small towns, a high activity of citizens is observed in cases “where it concerns the entities of social structure” (Expert 39; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.) and in situations where it is a question of “control over what happens in any spheres of city life” (Expert 38; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.).

Public activists positively assess regional and municipal programs related to the people’s budget and projects aimed at the development of territorial public self-government:

Territorial self-governments offer to improve territories. This process involves personal involvement and requires a lot of work. We have to provide one part of the funds ourselves, attract sponsors, and get the other part from the budget. It

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is difficult to get money from the budget, and it is necessary to prepare project documentation. This requires a large amount of organizational work, which is not visible to an ordinary person who is not involved in public work. I think this is a positive experience; there are many undeveloped areas in the city. (Expert 4; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

The interaction between the public and business plays a major role in area improvement:

The role of business in city development is also important since a large number of social facilities and projects cannot become a reality or be implemented without attracting some additional funds. (Expert 39; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

Successful examples exist where the problems of improvement are solved by citizens with the support of government and business or under the control of social activists:

There is such an institution as the institution of public inspectors which control the quality during repairs, asphalt laying, and road paving. On several occasions, public inspectors came to the site, disapproved of the quality of the laid asphalt, and as a result, the contractors had to redo it. (Expert 37; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

The second most common form of local community participation in the socio-economic space of the regions includes charity, assistance to the needy, and the most vulnerable social categories of the population. In particular, in the Vologda Oblast, Areopag public organization operates to assist young disabled people in accessing the benefits and privileges of education, employment, improvement of material status, housing, and living conditions that they are entitled to. This organization is one of the positive examples “that show the power of public organizations and their empowering capabilities” (Expert 8; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.).

Thus, the effects of citizen participation in the socio-economic space of the region complement the social policy implementation. Through participation, both formal (activities of nonprofit organizations) and informal (situational or via the implementation of civic initiatives, neighborhood and friendship associations, interest associations, network communities, etc.), socially significant problems that the state could not solve on its own can be addressed locally.

The positive impact of citizen participation can be traced in the context of the socio-cultural development of small territories. We consider socially useful activities (regardless of their formal or informal nature) not just as a resource for solving political or socio-economic issues but also as a source for developing collective traditions, solidarity, and social cohesion in Russian society.

Civic engagement of the population contributes to the development of territorial identity—in socio-humanitarian discourse, this is a social perception of belonging

to a localized social space, a certain community with its social interests. Citizen participation implies the realization of these interests. Social needs and the problems of individuals become public problems to be solved through joint activities, which enable the people involved to gain more control over community development, develop their social networks, and realize their identity (Ukhanova, 2021).

Joint activities in solving problems of local importance helps creating the *I–We* image. The attitude of people to the place of their residence constitutes an important characteristic of regional identity. It was revealed that the part of the population that is more actively involved in public life has a more positive perception of the small town as a place of their residence (55% and 60% of the answers are “I am glad to live here” and “I am happy, in general, but I am not satisfied with many things,” respectively; Table 3). Noteworthy is that among those who are more actively involved in the life of the local community, the proportion of those who are indifferent to the area of their residence is much smaller. The obtained data prove that engaging in civic participation has a positive impact on the perception of regional space as a comfortable place for living.

**Table 3**

*Population’s Attitude to Their Place of Residence Depending on the Degree of Participation in Socially Useful Activities, in %*

Indicators	How do you feel about the place where you live?				
		I am glad to live here	I am happy, in general, but I am not satisfied with many things	I don’t have any particular feelings about it	I don’t like living here, but I’m used to it
How actively do you participate in the development of your community?	seldom*	38	30	21	15
	often	55	60	6	4

*Note.* \*Henceforth the degree of participation in socially useful activities is assessed on a 10-point scale, according to which the indicators “seldom” and “often” are assigned from 1 to 3 points and from 7 to 10 points, respectively. The scores are determined by asking the question: “On a 10-point scale, how actively do you participate in the development of your community (yard, village, city, and region)?”

Source: Data of VolRC RAS sociological survey, 2022, Vologda Oblast.

The significance of territorial initiative communities is manifested in the development of social ties and interpersonal communication, which positively affects the level of trust and, in general, normalizes the social climate. A positive correlation was established between the degree of participation and institutional trust. As we can see, the active residents of the region trust the authorities of various levels more than the passive residents. In particular, the trust in the President of the Russian Federation is higher by 15 p.p. (61% vs. 46%); in the Government of the Russian Federation, by 21 p.p. (51% vs. 30%); in the head of the region, by 18 p.p. (52% vs. 34%); in the head of a municipal entity, by 19 p.p. (47% vs. 28%).

The analysis of data from sociological surveys revealed a correlation between the degree of citizen participation and social trust. The territorial community trusts their relatives and friends the most, followed by their neighbors and colleagues in the second place and most people and passers-by in the street in the third place. The level of trust in relatives is somewhat higher in the group of people who seldom participate



in socially useful activities (93% vs. 87%; Table 4). Conversely, the active residents of the region are more likely to trust neighbors and most people (by 4–5 p.p.). Thus, civic engagement is positively reflected in the level of social trust, which has a crucial effect under pandemic conditions. We agree with Kozyreva and Smirnov (2019) that in times of crisis, instability and insecurity increase in all the spheres of life, which undermines the potential of trust in the society and reduces social cohesion. In this connection, the importance of citizen participation as a high-potential resource in the development of the socio-cultural environment increases.

**Table 4**

*Social Trust Depending on the Degree of Participation in Socially Useful Activities (in % for Each Judgment\*)*

Indicators	Tell me, please, do you trust ...?						
	Your family members, relatives	Your friends	Your neighbors	Your colleagues	Most people	A passerby in the street	
How actively do you participate in the development of your community?	seldom*	92.5	76.8	43.1	43.6	20.5	17.9
	often	86.9	77.6	48.2	41.0	24.7	18.5

*Note.* \*Among those who seldom (1–4 points) and often (7–10 points) participate in public life. The scores are determined by asking the question: “On a 10-point scale, how actively do you participate in the development of your community (yard, village, and town)?” Source: Data of VoIRC RAS sociological survey, 2022, Vologda Oblast.

In the process of interaction through various practices of citizen participation, the population acquires the attributes of agency in social development: the goals of interaction are defined; strategies for their achievement and potential partners are identified; the course of action is developed; the social competence of involved actors increases due to the need to know the rules or procedures of interaction with the authorities. Being involved in public relations with the authorities, actors of citizen participation (individuals, groups, organizations, and communities) can gain popularity and the ability to influence public opinion, resulting in changes not only in the community of civic activists but also in the society in which they operate.

In this regard, it is encouraging that the readiness of activists to be professionally trained in the field of public activities is quite high. For example, a significant increase is observed in the number of applications for the Young Women’s Leadership Council:

In the third project year, there were over 400 applications for 40 spots, similar to a theater school. Applications were not only from the Vologda Oblast, but also from the neighboring Arkhangelsk Oblast, Yaroslavl Oblast, and Leningrad Oblast. That is, these are people who want to learn how to work as public servants. (Expert 8; Trans. by Y. U., E. K., & S. Z.)

To summarize, the analysis revealed a fairly high level of civic activity in various spheres of life, as well as the readiness of the population to be involved in different practices. In addition, the conducted sociological research convincingly shows

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that vertical and horizontal interactions of the population in the context of citizen participation in the development of small towns positively affects the socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural spheres.

The representatives of the younger generation, in particular, realize that social involvement, participation in charity work, and volunteerism earn respect from peers and adults, a certain status, as well as communication skills. All this enables their further development and self-development.

Noteworthy is that civic engagement has a positive impact on the perception of regional space as a comfortable place to live. Nevertheless, the civic position of Russian people on charity is rather passive, which is primarily attributed to their distrust of nonprofit public organizations. This can also be explained by echoes of the Soviet mentality: people have more faith in the state than in their own altruism, entrusting it with the solution of social problems. However, the role of citizens is also very important. Here, we are referring to the need to motivate the population to participate in solving the socio-economic problems of the territory.

In this connection, it is essential to develop an effective mechanism for increasing the involvement of local communities in the development of their territories. We believe that participation serves not only as a tool for solving socio-economic problems but also as a source of growing trust in the authorities and in each other, which is the basis for consolidating the society. Moreover, key tools and forms of participation to be used when introducing the mechanism will be determined on the basis of the conducted qualitative sociological research (expert interviews and focus groups), so far as they are relevant to the prospects of the community's participation in the development of their areas (the results of previous interviews demonstrate the most effective forms, such as elections, participation in public improvement of territories, informal forms of self-organization to ensure provision of urban amenities and charity, etc.). Generalization of the obtained data will make it possible to work out individual trajectories of small towns' development, which will be offered to the municipal authorities for practical testing.

## **Conclusion**

As Hong (2018) rightly points out, local residents constitute the most important and capable group that can actively participate in improving the everyday environment and creating livable communities. Of note is that a large number of collaborative initiatives extend beyond the community limited by regional geographical boundaries, and the communities of interest are developed. Nevertheless, it is the community, as people living and working in a particular place, that is most likely to participate in the development of a specific territory. It follows from the above that citizen participation can become the most important intangible factor in the development of small Russian towns. In this regard, creating conditions for the increase in citizen participation in society management as a motivated basis for its viability should be the benchmark and basis in achieving sustainable development. This explains the interest in the conceptual sociological analysis of the "citizen participation" phenomenon.

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