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## STAKEHOLDERS IN THE ETHNO-CONFESSIONAL SPACE OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS

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### *Abstract*

The current situation in the field of ethno-confessional relations of the regions asks for addressing the topic of developing a sociocultural mechanism for consolidating the regional community. At the same time, it is obvious that the solution of this problem will be successful, socially acceptable only when it begins to rely on theoretically developed dialogue-partner models of organizing space public communications. For scientific reflection on the phenomenon of this space, heuristic possibilities of the concept of public values management and stakeholder theory are used, the concepts of “space of public communications” and “interested parties” are introduced for scientific use. The role of stakeholders of the ethno-confessional space of public communications in harmonizing relations and generating conflicts is revealed on the basis of data, obtained using the expert survey method, mass field survey of the region’s population and an online survey of users of the “Vkontakte” social media platform. In the analysis of the data obtained, the authors came to the conclusion that public opinion links the generation of ethno-confessional conflicts with the activities of such representatives of interested parties as non-profit organizations. In these conditions, the organization of dialogue and partnership between all representatives of the ethno-confessional space of public communications is extremely important. But, understanding of the importance of interaction between civil society structures and the state, most of the participants in the expert survey point to a low level of organization of such contacts in the space of public communications.

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**Keywords:** Frontier region, stakeholders, ethno-confessional relations, nationality policy.



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## **1. Introduction**

The modern period of regional society development indicates the emergence of factors, leading to its destabilization and fragmentation on national and confessional grounds, an increase in the number of clashes based on ethno-confessional intolerance. This actualizes the development of partnerships and dialogue between civil society structures and government bodies. The problematical character of the current situation is in determining a sociocultural mechanism of consolidation of regional society. That said, it is obvious that the solution to this problem will be successful and socially acceptable only if it relies on theoretically developed models for organizing the space of public communications.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Intensification of the ethnic and cultural fragmentation of the regional community, which, for the majority of the population is superimposed on the growth of internal disintegrating circumstances (low incomes of the population, high prices for essential goods and utilities, poor material well-being, high unemployment and fear of losing a job, poor health and difficulties with medical treatment, poor housing and worsening housing conditions), acts as a factor contributing to the generation of interethnic and interconfessional conflicts. The solution to this problem involves the development of a model of dialogue-partner communication between representatives of all interested parties, aimed at minimizing the destructiveness of the above factor. The first step towards creating such a model should be the identification of stakeholders of the ethno-confessional space of public communications, their role in harmonizing relations and preventing conflicts in regional society.

## **3. Research Questions**

Despite significant steps taken in managing ethno-confessional processes, state policy on the regional level asks for rethinking, based on modern scholarly concepts. The concept of public values management is called upon to become such a new theoretical and methodological basis of regional national policy (Stoker, 2006). This concept directs the authorities to deepening interactions with stakeholders, creating conditions for their participation in public matters (Volkova, 2014; Slatinov, 2016).

An effective solution of socially significant problems of the region by the authorities of a constituent entity of the Russian Federation requires building and constant maintenance of dialogue-partnership relations with interested parties. Therefore, another methodological basis should be the theory of stakeholders, which argues that in achieving the goals of the activity, the diverse interests of various interested parties (stakeholders) should be taken into account. In its current form, the “concept of stakeholders” has been gaining ground since the mid 80-ies of the XX century, when the work of Edward Freeman “Strategic management: a stakeholder approach” is published (Freeman, 1984). In this book, the author introduces the concept of “interested party” (“stakeholder” in English) as a set of legal entities and individuals who are influenced by the decisions and actions of the management entity or themselves have an impact on it. There may be various relationships between stakeholders that are not always cooperative, but may also be competitive. However, all stakeholders can be considered as a single unit, and the resultant of the interests of its parts determines the trajectory of social development. This kind of

interaction with stakeholders is increasingly being used in the system of public administration, in particular, as a part of the concept of public value management (Volkova, 2013; Rotberg, 2014). The implemented concept of public value management affects, first of all, the communication system of government bodies with representatives of interested parties. Therefore, at present, the networks created by the state and consisting of stakeholders are recognized as the basis of public administration. (Smorgunov, 2014).

Hence, the concepts of “space of public communications” and “interested parties” become one of the key ones.

Public communications are associated with the transfer of socially significant information, access to which is provided for each member of the society, while simultaneously giving it public status. It should be noted that the semantics of the concept of “public” is revealed in two aspects: the visible – that which is open or accessible to others, is opposed to that which is hidden or removed from the view (and thereby forms “private”), and the collective – that which is collective or affects the interests of the collective, as opposed to the individual (private) (Weintraub, 1997). Public communication is a multitude of media channels that unite authorities and stakeholders of civil society for dialogue and partnership on issues of public interest (Zotov et al., 2017). In this context, public communication is the infrastructure for the functioning of the public sphere, which, according to Habermas (2013), is “the sphere of social life where public opinion is formed, it is an arena, a forum for public discourse on the socio-political problems of life and the development of society” (p. 230). The space of public communications is not homogeneous, but consists of many subspheres, one of which is the ethno-confessional space of public communications, which is a collection of media channels uniting the main stakeholders in order to solve socially significant issues in the field of interethnic and inter-confessional relations.

Interested parties are understood as actors in the public sphere who are influenced by the decisions and actions of the management entity or themselves have an impact on it. At the same time, stakeholders should be distinguished from the public as the active part of society, expressing its opinion. Interested parties are called upon to play a significant role in resolving value disputes in the interethnic and inter-confessional sphere. Their participation should be specially organized, which is achieved through their involvement in the process of decision making and implementation of in the above field.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to determine the role of stakeholders of the ethno-confessional space of public communications in harmonizing relations and preventing conflicts in the regional community.

#### **5. Research Methods**

In order to evaluate the activities of the main stakeholders in the space of ethno-confessional public communication, an expert survey was conducted among representatives of federal and regional state authorities, local governments, diasporas and public organizations, science and education in March 2019. The total number of experts is 100 people. The survey results were supplemented by data obtained by an online survey. The latter was conducted in April 2019 among users of the “Vkontakte” social media

platform which is highly popular among Internet users (reaching over 46 million people), and also equipped with special functionality for conducting a survey and subsequent analysis of user opinions. For this platform the opportunity of repeated participation in the survey appears only when changing the account used. About 500 users answered each of the questions presented. To obtain a reliable and justified assessment of public opinion on the role of interested parties in building ethno-confessional relations in the region, a mass field survey was conducted in May 2019 (a sample of 1.500 people among the population of the Kursk region over 18 years old, created on the basis of age and gender quotas and quotas per place of residence).

## 6. Findings

Today in the Kursk region there is no clearly conflict situation in the field of interethnic and inter-confessional relations. The results of the mass field study show a positive attitude rate of 82%, of which 36 % perceive representatives of another nationality benevolently and 46% – neutrally. This is also evidenced by the fact that 88 % of the experts surveyed do not expect open conflicts on ethnic grounds in the region of their residence in the near future, as well as their favorable assessment of the situation with interethnic and interfaith relations (see table 01).

**Table 01.** Distribution of answers to the question “How do you assess the situation with interethnic and interfaith relations?” depending on the degree of proximity of events to the respondent, %

Size of the territory	Evaluation of the situation			
	Conflict-free	Neutral	Tense	Conflictual
1. In Russia	28	42	29	1
2. In Kursk region	46	50	3	1
3. In place of residence	58	38	3	1

The data obtained are consistent with data from other studies in the Kursk region (Antsiferova, 2016), and the region under study looks even more successful in comparison with some other constituent entities of the Russian Federation (Zavialova, 2014; Omelchenko et al., 2017).

Undoubtedly, the conflict situation in most cases develops as a result of a complex of causes and conditions. But history convincingly shows that conflict prevention at an early stage is possible only in conditions of dialogue and partnership of all interested parties.

In the course of our study, the main stakeholders of the ethno-confessional space of public communications were identified, including:

1. Federal territorial bodies, including law enforcement and human rights bodies: migration departments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia for the constituent entity of the Russian Federation, regional Center for Combating Extremism of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, Departments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia for municipal districts, the Federal Security Service, and the Federal Agency for Nationalities

2. Regional authorities, including the executive bodies of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation, the administration of municipal districts, rural and urban settlements.

3. Mediators represented by consultative and advisory bodies on interethnic relations, which in the Kursk region include the interagency commission on interethnic and inter-confessional relations and the working group on harmonization of interethnic relations.

4. Civil society structures represented by political parties, religious associations, youth associations, non-profit organizations created on an ethnic basis and the Cossacks.

5. Mass media represented by federal, regional and local periodicals, television and radio channels broadcast in the region.

6. The local community, represented by public organizations at the place of residence (territorial public self-government – TPS, street and house committees).

7. Higher education institutions providing training to international students.

Regarding the latter, it should be noted that in the conditions of the mono-ethnicity of the region, the number of foreign students is quite large. E.g., Kursk State Medical University has more than 2.500 students from other countries, South-Western State University – more than 700, Kursk State University – more than 300 people. For comparison: 13.6 thousand Ukrainians, or 1.2 %; 5.7 thousand Armenians, 1.7 thousand Belarusians, or 0.2 % and 1.7 thousand Azerbaijanis live in the region. Hence, higher educational institutions, undoubtedly, must be taken into account as stakeholders in the ethno-confessional space of public communications.

As can be seen from the data presented in Table 2, the interviewed experts acknowledge that the power structures make the largest contribution to the harmonization of ethno-confessional relations: the Federal Security Service and the Center for Combating Extremism of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the Kursk Region, and the departments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia for municipal districts.

**Table 02.** Expert assessment of a role of stakeholders of ethno-confessional space of public communications in relations harmonization and in causing conflicts on a 10-ball scale

Stakeholder	Contribution to	
	Harmonization of relations	Conflict generation
Federal Security Service	3,6	2,1
Center for Combating Extremism of the Ministry of Internal Affairs	3,5	2,0
Administration of the Region	3,3	1,2
Religious associations	3,2	2,0
Working group on interethnic relations	3,2	1,7
Interagency commission on interethnic and inter-confessional relations	3,2	1,8
Departments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs for municipal districts	3,2	1,8
Administration of municipal districts	3,0	1,1
Higher education institutions	3,0	1,1
Migration departments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs	3,0	2,2
Federal Agency for Nationalities	3,0	1,9
Ethnic diasporas	2,9	1,8
The Cossacs	2,9	1,8

Youth associations	2,9	1,9
Mass media outlets	2,8	2,0
non-profit organizations created on an ethnic basis	2,8	2,3
Administrations of rural and urban settlements	2,7	1,4
Political parties	2,2	1,6

After that experts note the role of the Kursk Region Administration, and representatives of mediators were only in third positions: the interagency commission on interethnic and interfaith relations and the working group on harmonization of interethnic relations in the Kursk region. At the same time, the contribution of such important agents of preserving interethnic peace and harmony as mass media, settlement administrations and non-profit organizations created on an ethnic basis, was evaluated much lower by the experts.

Due to the nature of the mass survey and online survey, representatives of interested parties were divided into structures that represent 1) authorities or are affiliated with them and 2) civil society. In relation to the former, the question was asked: “Which of the authorities are conducting the most active work in the field of interethnic and cross-national relations in our region?” (See table 3). In the mass survey of the population, despite the difference in absolute values between the field survey and the online survey, when ranking the responses, it is clear that the key positions among the authorities that are most active in the field of interethnic and interethnic relations in the region were occupied by the power structures (Federal Security Service, departments of Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia for municipal districts, the Office for Migration), as well as the Administration of the region.

**Table 03.** Distribution of answers to the question “Which authorities are the most active in the sphere of ethno-confessional relations in our region?”, in %

Authorities	Field survey results, %	Internet survey result, %
Federal Security Service	<b>16</b>	<b>47</b>
Administration of the Kursk Region	<b>26</b>	<b>44</b>
Departments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs for municipal districts	11	<b>33</b>
Center for Combating Extremism of the Ministry of Internal Affairs	<b>16</b>	<b>28</b>
Interagency commission on interethnic and inter-confessional relations	14	26
Migration department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs	<b>16</b>	26
Administrations of rural and urban settlements	13	17
Federal Agency for Nationalities	15	17
Administration of municipal districts /urban districts	14	16
Working group on harmonization of interethnic relations	6	14
Not sure	26	*

Note: \* – “Not sure” option was not provided

Therefore, it can be argued: in the public consciousness, the prevailing opinion is that the resolution of problems of interethnic and cross-national relations (conflict prevention and harmonization of contacts)

is in the law enforcement sphere, not in the public sphere. And representatives of law enforcement agencies in the sphere, firstly, resort to forceful methods and means of resolving conflicts and, accordingly, restoring law and order, and secondly, they work to prevent the development of conflicts. It is possible that in the context of growing extremism, nationalism and religious fundamentalism one can find a certain reasonable “justification” for the established public opinion about the importance of law enforcement agencies in the ethno-confessional sphere. For example, due to the fact that one of their central functions is the function of protecting, preserving and maintaining integrity, resilience of the country, protecting the interests of citizens, and counteracting all kinds of negative influences, both external and internal ones. But we must not forget that sometimes the forms and methods of the state’s struggle against extremism themselves become factors in the intensification of national conflicts. This, in principle, is demonstrated by the answers of experts who note that among those who contribute to the generation of conflicts, in addition to political parties and non-profit organizations created on a national basis, there are also power structures: the Federal Security Service and the Office for Migration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia.

At the same time, the power component of the state’s activity should not be contraposed to the efforts of civil society structures, its individual members, aimed at establishing and maintaining harmonious interethnic and interfaith relations in the region. Only if there is an appropriate ethno-confessional space of public communications, fulfilling the tasks of consolidating society, the stability of the regional community and its successful development can be guaranteed.

In this regard, the participants in the field survey and the online survey were asked questions that focused on identifying opinions about the contribution of representatives of interested parties to conflict generation and harmonization of relations in the ethno-confessional sphere (Table 4). The results of the survey showed that respondents recognized the greatest contribution to the harmonization of ethno-confessional relations made by youth associations and higher educational institutions, which are called upon to carry out systematic work to educate the younger generation in the spirit of tolerance for national and religious differences in the population of the country, the region, and the settlement. In addition, in the field survey, religious organizations and associations, along with non-profit organizations created on an ethnic basis, are recognized as stakeholders who make a certain contribution to the harmonization of ethno-confessional relations.

**Table 04.** Opinion of respondents about the contribution of major stakeholders to the generation of conflicts and harmonization of relations in the ethno-confessional sphere, in %

Civil society structures	Field survey results		Internet survey result	
	In harmonizing relations, %	In conflict generation, %	In harmonizing relations, %	In conflict generation, %
Ethnic diasporas	14	<b>15</b>	28	<b>47</b>
Religious organizations and associations	<b>19</b>	<b>13</b>	27	<b>44</b>
Youth associations	<b>20</b>	6	<b>52</b>	26
non-profit organizations created on an ethnic basis	<b>19</b>	8	15	<b>51</b>
Higher education institutions	<b>20</b>	2	<b>51</b>	7

Regional mass media outlets	10	7	28	14
Federal mass media outlets	12	12	10	18
Political parties	8	5	15	14
Public organizations at the place of residence (TPS, street and house committees)	6	2	10	7
The Cossacs	5	4	9	6
Not sure	22	44	*	*

Note\* – “Not sure” option was not provided

In the opinion of surveyed residents of the region, the largest contribution to the development of ethno-confessional conflicts is made by such representatives of interested parties as ethnic diasporas and religious organizations. Social media users add to this list non-profit organizations created on an ethnic basis. It can be assumed that in the conditions of the region’s mono-ethnicity, the majority of the Russian-speaking population of the region (in Kursk region 96 % of residents are ethnic Russians), an attempt to unite citizens on an ethnic or religious basis is perceived inimically.

In these conditions, it is extremely important to organize a dialogue and partnership between all actors of the ethno-confessional space of public communication. But, unfortunately, experts point out, while of interaction between civil society structures and the state is important, to the weakness of the organization of such contacts in the space of public communications. That said, the following should be noted: the opinion of experts and respondents about the importance of civil society structures as stakeholders in resolving problematic issues in the field of ethno-confessional relations does not coincide to a certain extent. Although, perhaps, the form of the question played a role in this case, nevertheless, the result of the survey deserves attention. In the view of the experts, the most important is the streamlining of the process of interaction with non-profit organizations created on an ethnic basis, mass media and ethnic diasporas. At the same time, youth movements were prioritized by respondents, representing the population, and ethnic diasporas and religious associations only followed them. Since higher education institutions occupy the fourth position in the results of mass surveys, it can be assumed that the population and representatives of the expert community (and these are employees of federal and regional state authorities, local governments, public, scientific and educational organizations) see the opportunity of harmonizing ethno-confessional relations differently. The population is more inclined to the “melting pot” variant, within the framework of which the formation of the all-Russian and regional identity is taking place, and experts are inclined to the option of building a dialogue and partnership with representatives of other nationalities and faiths. It is no coincidence that today the question is raised specifically about the institutionalization of the mechanisms of dialogue and partnership between the state and national minorities (Gadzhiev, 2016; Shaikhislamov et al., 2012).

## 7. Conclusion

Organization of the space of ethno-confessional public communication is an important factor in consolidating Russian society at the level of its regions and reducing the risks of interethnic and ethno-confessional conflicts. Organization of dialogue and partnership in this space of public communication will contribute to solving a range of practical problems, including reaching concordance of residents of



various nationalities and ethno-confessional groups, establishing mutual trust relations; search and implementation of various forms of constructive cooperation in their own interests and the interests of the regional community. But at the moment, as shown by the results of the survey of experts, with the understanding of the importance of interaction between civil society structures and the state, there is a low level of organization of such contacts in the space of public communications. In addition, the following opinion was formed in public consciousness: the generation of ethno-confessional conflicts is associated with the activities of such representatives of interested parties as non-profit organizations created on an ethnic basis, ethnic diasporas and religious organizations, and the resolution of problems of interethnic and cross-national relations is not seen in the space of public communications, but in law enforcement sphere. This requires the establishment of interaction between stakeholders as a regular consistent process based on building dialogue and partnership. As a result, this will contribute to the sustainable development of the region.

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