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CIVIL SOCIETY OR SELF-ISOLATING ANARCHY

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Abstract

A pandemic in 2020 like any other catastrophe hit mankind unexpectedly. World powers reacted differently to new challenges. Unfortunately, mankind did not manage, or rather, had no desire to act together in developing a single mechanism to counter the threat that arose. As a result, the whole world got to a dead end, not only economic, but also managerial. In addition, in many countries the level of discontent among the masses of actions and the restrictive measures introduced by their ruling bodies sharply increased. As a result, protests occurred in many countries. While in a number of countries the unrest began 2–3 months after the introduction of restrictive measures, in Russia the first open protest took place a month after the introduction of the self-isolation regime. The article considers the situation which arose as a result of a pandemic in the capital of North Ossetia, Vladikavkaz. The prerequisites and reasons that led to protest moods and protests are being investigated. Using actual material and the results of interviews conducted with participants of the “people's gathering”, the author studied the protest potential in the region and identified possible scenarios for further developments. In transition to a new socio-formative reality, it is necessary to conduct a constant sociological section of social processes in society and develop strategies for crisis survival. Otherwise, from the view point of readiness for solidarity, a permanent protest that can destroy the entire social structure of a given society even in a low-resource group is possible.

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1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic and self-isolation, together with a huge stream of ambiguous information in the Internet space, have become a fertile ground for all kinds of reasoning and conclusions, reinforced the total distrust of not only the current political institutions of power, but also of the opposition. It was this deep mistrust of power that provoked Russians to violate the regime of self-isolation 1.5–2 times more often than in Europe and the United States (Polozov, 2020). The relevance of this topic lies in the need to study and analyze a new challenge to humanity, in the study of new social risks, their manifestations and impact on modern reality.

2. Problem Statement

The emerging threat to humanity in the form of a new coronavirus infection has changed the previously formed way of life and began to dictate new rules to which society has not adapted yet. As a result, tension is ripening in society and can manifest itself in various destructive forms.

3. Research Questions

The subject of this article is the social processes taking place in North Ossetian society in connection with a new coronavirus infection.

1. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to study the cause-effect relationships affecting the social processes that are currently taking place in North Ossetian society.
2. To study the level of social tension and its impact on further social processes.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the work is to determine the prerequisites and reasons that provoked a protest action in the low-resource group.

5. Research Methods

With the objective to solve the tasks the author used the methods of interviews, included observations and content analysis. A questionnaire consisting of 12 questions was developed for the interview. 10 participants of the “people’s gathering” were interviewed. The survey was conducted by the Department of Social and Political Studies of the North Ossetian Institute for Humanitarian and Social Research. During the survey, it was planned to identify the prerequisites and reasons that provoked the protest mood, the social structure of the gathering participants, their requirements and level of organization, the reaction of the authorities.

6. Findings

A study conducted by the expert analysis department of National Research University Higher School of Economics from March 18th to May 26th showed that the most skeptics and opponents of restrictions were in the Southern Federal District, where 41.1 % considered the epidemic a fiction. More than 60 % of the district respondents believed that there should have been less restrictions during the epidemic and that the restrictions should have been removed earlier (42.7 %). At the same time, the region is in second place in terms of the number of respondents who either completely lost their income, or it significantly decreased (52.1 %). Most respondents who experienced a significant decrease in income or completely lost it were in the North Caucasus Federal District (53.8 %) (Gubernatorov, 2020).

The first protest action took place in this district. In Vladikavkaz, the capital of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, on April 20, 2020, at a time when the pandemic in the region was just starting to develop, a “people’s gathering” took place. It was inspired and initiated by a social activist, opera singer Vadim Cheldiev. Rejecting the danger of coronavirus infection, he urged people to ignore the restrictive measures introduced, offering a protest in the form of a “people’s gathering”. Apparently, Cheldiev tried to distinguish the action from the political background by its name “people’s gathering”.

Protest moods during the period of self-isolation were recorded not only in North Ossetia but also throughout Russia. Background discontent was caused not only by the regime of restrictive measures but also by the steps taken by the country’s political institutions. However, it was Vladikavkaz that became the place where virtual discontent grew into real one and took the form of a combined image of aggression, fear, despair. What caused the protest social activity, and even the collective actions in the society characterized by low civic awareness?

A number of Russian experts, analyzing the events of April 20, 2020 in Vladikavkaz, believe that North Ossetia is historically a region with democratic traditions, from rallies to the movement that emerged after the terrorist attack in Beslan and led to the resignation of the head of the republic, Alexander Dzasokhov. Mikhail Vinogradov, the Head of the Petersburg Politics Foundation, believes that North Ossetia is a region with less distance between the authorities and the population than the average regions of Russia. The Beslan terrorist attack became that virus of distrust towards political institutions, which permanently, although often latently, provokes the regional society for critical and sometimes aggressive attacks against the authorities of any level.

In addition, there is a factor that is not very strong with regards to developing management strategies of local government. Bitarov V. Z., the head of the republic came into big politics as a businessman without much experience in political work. However, in North Ossetia the problem of replacement traditionally arises, since the appointment of the heads of the republic has always been chaotic.

People feel lack of empathy on the part of federal and local authorities. Therefore, according to experts, there are objective reasons for such actions. However, the system of normative acts built in recent years prevents the non-institutional mass events not initiated by the authorities. Therefore, people have a fear of them. At the same time, each of such actions inevitably becomes political and receives more resonance than it would receive if mass demonstrations were part of the political landscape (Mukhametshina, 2020).

A prerequisite for a protest action in Vladikavkaz may also be the consequence of emergency federalization, which neither the center nor the regions are ready for. The federal center, having failed to develop the scenario of optimal interaction with the constituent entities in a critical situation, delegated them ample powers in building a policy to combat coronavirus and developing effective mechanisms for restrictive measures, which was unexpected for the regions. Many regional leaders were not ready for such a degree of independence and a regime of increased responsibility. And, as a consequence, they did not always build an effective algorithm of actions. In this particular case, the regional authorities were unable to explain to the citizens the serious danger of COVID-19 and to convince them of the need to observe all precautions. The authorities themselves did not set an example of correct self-isolation.

The regional authorities did not manage to be convincing enough in justifying the self-isolation mode. The measures they proposed were inconsistent and selective. Interviewers wondered why big business, large retail outlets, which some representatives of the republic's political elite were directly involved in, functioned, while small retail outlets, where the risk of infection is much lower, were prohibited from working. Two weeks after the restrictive measures were imposed in Digore, people initiated a protest. The next day, minibus workers declared their disagreement with the self-isolation mode, after which they were allowed to work.

The regional administration, various public institutions were unable to make adjustments to the funeral and memorial rituals of the people due to new risks. A significant number of cases were due to infection in places where funeral events took place.

The lack of an adequate social policy during the period of self-isolation is one of the main reasons for people to protest. Meanwhile, North Ossetia is a region where the majority of the population works for the shadow business with under-the-counter wages. According to expert estimates, shady employment in North Ossetia is about 50–70 %. Moreover, the situation can be changed, most likely, only within the framework of the Spatial Development Strategy (Kulov et al., 2019).

According to the results of the interviews with the participants of the “people’s gathering”, the main reason for the protest action was the economic problems that people faced in connection with the self-isolation mode. This opinion was shared by 100 % of interviewers. The respondents answered that the reason for the “people’s gathering” was as follows: the situation with the restrictions adopted by the leadership, and those measures of support, or, conversely, not providing people who have no other sources of income, except for those who they intercepted, someone in bazaars, someone in stores; people did not have a source of earnings and this was the main reason (Male, 50 years old); ... The hopelessness of the self-employed.... People ran out of source of income and they went out into the street, because the next day they would have nothing to feed their children with (Female, 46 years old).

The coronavirus has become a crash test not only for the economy, healthcare and science. The pandemic has been a serious test for the psyche of ordinary people. Studies and polls showed that news flow, mode of restrictions, uncertainty (primarily financial one), provoked the development of mental disorders in the population. The negative effect from them will continue even after the rejection of restrictive measures and down growth of the incidence of COVID-19. The longer the quarantine is, the higher the likelihood of developing post-traumatic stress symptoms, avoidance and aggressive behavior (Selina, 2020).

The protest action in Vladikavkaz was spontaneous, since the confidence in the resources of this or that enterprise is always necessary for any social activity, and, particularly, for collective one. As a matter of fact, in low-resource groups, which include the civil society of North Ossetia, the potential for solidarity and, accordingly, the possibility of collective action is significantly lower (Shubkin & Klimov, 2005).

Their protest is an emotional, affective one triggered not by a further deterioration of the situation but by an encroachment on constants, when there is no longer any sense and possibility to rely and hope for them when the hopes for stability face its absence de facto. Then the lack of resources ceases to be a constraining factor (Klimov, 2008). This hypothesis is confirmed by the answers of all interviewers.

Having been the participants of the protest action, they noted the spontaneity and anarchy of the event, the absence of organizers. *“According to my information, Cheldiev’s associates must have been the organizers of the gathering. However, it seems, these potential leaders were detained by the security forces the day before the gathering” (Male, 52 years old). “I didn’t see the organizers there. It was a chaos. If someone took on the role of a leader, maybe it would be useful. There was no order of actions” (Female, 72 years old). “Perhaps there were organizers but they were not familiar to me. The people were at the breaking point and it was enough for the most disaffected to know the date, time and place to make them participate” (Female, 46 years old).*

Participation in the protest action of the interviewers was prompted by a sense of responsibility for the future, complicity with people who were completely broke, dissatisfaction with the actions of the regional authorities. *“My conscience, awareness of responsibility to my children and family prompted me to take part in the gathering (Male, 55 years old). “Compassion moved me. I considered it my duty to be there” (Female, 50 years old).*

Of course, there was a group of initiators instigating the protest action. However, it was virtual and formed in the Internet. The megaphone of this group was Vadim Cheldiev, whose phenomenon played a significant role in the action. Their actions were not conspiratorial and, therefore, predictable. However, the law enforcement agencies either did not adequately predict the threat, or, for some reason, did not take appropriate measures to prevent the escalation of unrest and mass infection of the population. However, the security agencies managed to neutralize the more or less active initiators of the planned protest. As a result, the action ended up without any organizing force and, therefore, without a clear plan of action and demands. Nevertheless, the people who came to the gathering were in the same emotional state caused by certain external factors, and their relationship acquired the character of focused interaction (Giddens, 1999), giving them the opportunity to act as a single social organism. It is this spontaneous state of the crowd that is the most unpredictable and, therefore, dangerous not only for the authorities but also for the protesters themselves. Therefore, if the law enforcement agencies really isolated the alleged organizers and at the same time did not prevent the protest action, then they deliberately adjusted the situation to a dramatic scenario.

The situation was resolved relatively well, most likely due to the fact that strong outbursts of aggression were not assumed to be revealed by the protesters. According to the interviewers’ description, the rally participants were “citizens of different ages, different social status. I saw relatives, teachers,

classmates, and acquaintances there” (Male, 50 years old). Eyewitnesses claim that mainly middle-aged people (35–60 years old) took part in the action. There were many young people and those over seventy.

One of the interviewers believes that, despite the fact that the gathering emerged “spontaneously and unsystematically, he did not notice any aggression from the protesters. On the contrary, people urged each other in every possible way not to succumb to provocations” (Male, 45 years old). Another participant of the rally shared his impressions: “I didn’t like how the gathering went. Unfortunately, the people did not see the leaders who they could respect and trust.” (Male, 40 years old).

All interviewers left the place where the “people’s gathering” was organized before the riots and detentions began. According to this information and other eyewitnesses, law enforcement agencies tried to act correctly but persistently broke the protesters into segments and gradually squeezed them out. “The law enforcers behaved the way they were ordered. There was nothing particularly aggressive there. When they called everyone to disperse, it was necessary to disperse” (Male, 48 years old).

However, in the evening, when the majority of the people left the square, provocations began and instigated a clash between the police and the people who remained in the square. As a result, 69 people were detained. For the moment, about 30 detainees have been transported to Rostov, where an investigation is underway.

The interviewers characterize the reaction of the republic’s leadership to the protest action as incomprehensible and dubious. The head of the republic, deputies, members of the head’s administration went out to the people but could not find common language.

According to the majority of interviewers, the “people’s gathering” did not produce the results that participants expected. *“The result of the gathering, in my opinion, is as follows: the authorities ensured that people are ready for mass actions rather than express indignation at home. If there is a leader with a reasonable opposition program, people will follow him.”* (Male, 55 years old). *“We haven’t achieved any results. Unfortunately, there is no respected person who would be for the people, there are no recognized authorities in society”* (Male, 38 years old). Although, there is also an opinion that the regional authorities made some conclusions and began to provide assistance to those who got no means of support, large and needy families.

The reaction to the protest rally in Vladikavkaz at the peak of the self-isolation mode was explosive, albeit ambiguous. The official media sharply criticized the violation of restrictive measures, presenting the protesters as a crowd of marginalized people, a bunch of drug addicts and idlers. However, the Internet was frantic and unequivocally supported the protesters, calling for such actions in all regions. That is, in Russia, as in many other countries, against the background of the pandemic, problems, which in a normal situation could be perceived more calmly, have exacerbated.

People in the republic have two opinions about the need for the gathering. It seems that the demands are also correct and it is necessary to declare them so that the authorities remember their obligations to the people and take measures to fulfill them. However, it should be done in an organized and consistent manner with regards to all external factors, without populism and provocations, having considered all the risks and at the heart of good intentions with the motto “do not harm”.

7. Conclusion

Opinion polls show that protest actions, even with a small number of participants, almost always attract people's attention and arouse their approval, especially when the goals and demands are understandable by the majority of ordinary citizens (Glukhova et al., 2020).

At the same time, people engaged in social expertise have developed a persistently skeptical attitude towards protest activity: actions of this kind are perceived for the most part as ineffective. Even in the case of success, the keynotes in the assessments are the low performance of the protest and the "immediacy" of its results.

Despite the general background of dissatisfaction with the socio-economic state, the population of the republic does not have the resources and levers with which it could seek to improve its situation. There are no forces in society that could build the process of protecting the rights and interests of the citizens of the republic consistently, persistently and competently.

A deeply fragmented society suffering from social entropy and social anomie is not capable of increasing its energy potential, mobilization and other actions necessary for effective development and finding adequate responses to growing external challenges and internal threats (Osipov & Lokosov, 2012).

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