

# Regional Environment in the Context of Regional Differences in the Russian Society

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## Abstract

**Background/Objectives:** The way the problems of “catch-up” development of Russian regions is presented and fixed in the public mind often provokes inter-regional migration, which narrows to the limits of redistribution of labor resources in the raw areas or cities. **Methods/Statistical analysis:** This article is based on the methodological apparatus of sociological theories identifying the nature and content of the modernization process and social change in general. The methodological basis is constituted by works of Russian and foreign scientists developing the theory of complex systems, decision-making, raising the questions of regional management and management of large territorial environments. **Findings:** Changes in the geopolitical situation, the transition to high-performance economy make impossible to claim that if the Russian Federation is a self-sufficient country as for its territory and mineral resources, the development of the regions is provided by “leaders”. In our view, having major regional differences this scheme of “locomotive pulling the wagons” is not optimal, since there are serious battles in the distribution of social and economic resources, and recipient regions are in a position of eternal asylums. Noting that the colossal amount of regional differences relates to the fact that the scheme “the rich – poor” regions is reproduced, and 2/3 of the RF subjects having the proportion of people with incomes below the subsistence level exceeds the Russian average,<sup>12</sup> it can be stated, that the regional environment can, if not radically, then substantially change this situation through the new redefining of movement of technologies and intensity of communications. **Applications/Improvements:** Regional environment should attract more scientists’ attraction as it has sufficient intellectual, social and human potential for social development.

**Keywords:** Inter-regional Relations, Regional Development, Regional Environment, Russian Regions

## 1. Introduction

The way the problems of “catch-up” development of Russian regions is presented and fixed in the public mind often provokes inter-regional migration, which narrows to the limits of redistribution of labor resources in the raw areas or cities. A more optimistic picture is represented in the fact that it is important to believe in its own strength for the regional environment, to achieve the required level of self-minded and optimistic-minded people in the contingent of socially and economically self-regulating people.

It may be noted that the development of Russian regions in the framework of all-national development strategy does not eliminate the variability of approaches to regional problems. Moreover, the implementation of federal target programs, inter-regional and regional

projects shows which development priorities are primacy that depends on the independence and competence of the regional environment. Expectations of growth, especially associated with the arrival of foreign investors, often drives in a situation of unjustified expectations, and the position of those regional communities, where mechanisms of self-support and self-development are found at least at the local level (Novgorod, Pskov, Yaroslavl, Nizhny Novgorod, Rostov regions) seems winning.

## 2. Literature Review and Research Methodology

In the context of our study the following works directly related to the problems stated in the article are the most important: certain problems of modernization

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are discussed in works by Eisenstadt,<sup>1</sup> Mergel,<sup>2</sup> Beck,<sup>3</sup> Verhofstadt,<sup>4</sup> Cohn-Bendit,<sup>5</sup> Tabellini<sup>6</sup> consider theoretical and practical aspects of the region management, regional development; issues about modernization of large territorial societies are paid attention to by Beck and Grande,<sup>7</sup> special aspects of regional potential are considered by Posukhova and Zayats<sup>8</sup>; Volkov<sup>9</sup> identifies and analyzes different actors of the regional administration and development.

This article is based on the methodological apparatus of sociological theories identifying the nature and content of the modernization process and social change in general. The methodological basis is constituted by works of Russian and foreign scientists developing the theory of complex systems, decision-making, raising the questions of regional management and management of large territorial environments.

When writing this article, the authors used a series of scientific and special methods designed to ensure a holistic paradigmatic understanding of regional issues in a regional differentiation of Russian regional environment. For this purpose, primarily a systemic approach was used which provides wide, multi-dimensional picture of the functional unity of regional individual elements. Also, the authors used such classical methods as analysis and synthesis, methodology of knowledge of general and special, primary and secondary, historical and logic, dialectics of complex phenomena contradictory development. Conceptual, attributive and functional approaches to research have also found the application of their own. Authors rely on the results of empirical studies, data of expertise and analytical reports of All-Russian sociological studies.

### 3. Main Results

Duality and ambiguity of globalization practices reinforces the need not only in the definition of national-cultural civilizational identity,<sup>10</sup> but also makes regional identity, the awareness of belonging and involvement in the life of the region as a social and social and cultural space an important component. At that it is an interesting fact that during this period, although the proportion of Russians who are highly dependent on the state and social policy carried by it remained almost unchanged (34%),<sup>10</sup> this figure is unevenly distributed across regions.

Growth in employment, self-employment, expansion of self-regulating legal practices commits to the fact that

in the conditions of occurrence of large corporations or rigidity of public policy the involvement of citizens into the solution of regional current affairs is recognized, strong opinion about the benefits of social and political participation is formed. Based on the fact that none of the regional environment as a collective entity should have precedence over the other, it may be said that a sharp decline in political activity of citizens may be well offset by an interest in social development issues.

It would be wrong to assume that indifference to the regional life has a total character: from 12% to 14% of Russians insistently show interest in regional issues.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, it seems a minor indicator, on the other – weighty enough to drive from the dead-lock life in regional environment.

The allegation that the regional environment is passive, may acquire a character of some general sociological constants. But in general in real life regional environment deviates from the stated position, because the emphasis in social development can be differently arranged. A key problem of regional environment is the lack of consolidation and mobilization and non-inclusion of real resources, which the region has in addition to the real factors. What is seen as a way out of this situation and what should be done to ensure the involvement of the regional environment into the social development really, tangibly and effectively?

Attention is drawn to the fact that in Russian regions the political activity discredited itself, because it is linked with interests of neither specific individuals, or specific groups of people or the region as a whole. The social activity is defined as desired, but negatively assessed according to the criterion of the impact on decisions in a regional management system. Recently it has become commonplace to appeal to the state of the regional authority, to increase political and public control over the activities of the regional administrations and to connect them with the voters' interests.

Without disputing the desirability of democratic and accountable forms of regional management, we one should talk about the necessity in a sharp increase of educational potential, social potential of regional environment in order to the fact that the system of regional management requirements should, at least, correspond to the state of environment, that at the level of regional management not visitors from the capital or leaders with gifts to the people are expected, but really qualified personnel that can be co-opted from the regional environment,

provided that quite a dense layer of professional managers has been formed in the regional space.

In contrast to the popular belief that people expect only positive distributive social policy from the regional management, the increase of such criteria as professionalism and competence of officials, their diligence and efficiency, initiative, good organizational skills is noted.<sup>11</sup> In other words, people's groups representing regional environment, in spite of constant social independence, realize that the electoral mechanisms are not a sufficient guarantee to improve the quality of regional management, as well as the effectiveness of regional management is determined by openness, receptivity and innovativeness of regional environment.

As noted above, people clearly have prejudice to the role of regional environment, although the majority of Russians recognize that it is hardly possible to ensure sustainable development of the regions without the activity at the regional level: there is, apparently, a lack in bringing society in a positive and mobilization condition, confidence in the fact that the most important problems can be solved with the help of the initiative in the region without the participation of the center or in connection with the center.

Accusing officials in indifference to the interests of the country (41% of people), and noting the low business skills, incompetence, there is a feeling of an outsider or considerations about the fact that the life in the region will straighten out.<sup>10</sup> The task of people is to assist in the work of the regional authorities. And this is a minimum requirement. It is a breakaway from the indifference position that laid as it seems the potential of regional environment consolidation. And the thing is as follows.

For the regional development the formation of a new image of regional "we" in a complex controversial regional context is of significant importance, which would insert successfully into a new system of relationships, developed new social meanings and values<sup>10</sup>. Perceptions about the region as a dependent and passive community correspond only to the dependent control formula. Another negative consequence of existing things is the fact that, speaking about the problems of regional life, complaining about arbitrary and selfishness of power, the regional subjectivity is perceived as some unachievable ideal.

Thus, it can be said that for bringing the regional environment in the required subjective state, firstly, it is necessary to identify and promote, facilitate and open up new opportunities for the groups of social growth;

secondly, to formulate universally valid priorities for regional development; third, to create an atmosphere of mutual trust alongside with hopes for that with the increasing of social activity of people a qualitative change in a crisis situation can occur.

Sociological analysis shows that changes in self-perception of people in Russian society over the past two decades are truly enormous. And they are manifested primarily in the substantial reduction of those who feel themselves as social outsiders, simultaneously in the increase of those considering themselves as members of the middle strata.<sup>10</sup> This certainly affects the stability in the Russian society, but, unfortunately, the consolidation of social complacency at the individual level is not modeled on the state of the activity at the level of regional environment.

Feeling themselves quite socially-satisfied, people often consider position in the regional environment as unsatisfactory. This can be explained by what is called microscopisation of social relations and individualization of life strategies, narrowing the sphere of security and social belonging. One forgets that assessing the situation in the country as a crisis one (67%),<sup>10</sup> one should remember that Russia is regionally heterogeneous and, along with the negative depressive tendencies in the regional map of the country there are regional environments, fitting into the contemporary socio-economic context.

Regional environment objectively becomes a subject of social development, because it is a subject of preservation of the state and, at the same time, solution to a question of regional management, heterogeneous naturally, economically, socially and culturally. The inefficiency of the economic and political hypercentralism allows broadening of powers of regional development. But the real shift from administrative to social practices is possible if regional environment involves into the processes of regional development by applying efforts at different levels.

Economic considerations may play some role, but the main reason is a request for a life quality increase in regional environment. The most popular qualities are the concernment in regional interest, diligence, initiative, respect to people and pursuit of long-term planning.

## 4. Discussion

Agreeing with the statement that the regional environment is not identical to the people, that certain time and

transformations are required, so as a working social community will appear, this period cannot be attributed to the distant future. Furthermore, assessment of the state of regional societies suggests that the improvement of situations in economic and social spheres is connected with the fact to what extent people feel that they belong to the regional community, at that differentiating in the assessment of their own socio-status positions and social complacency they can have a good opportunity to realize themselves as a representative of the regional environment, to start from regional identity as the current formula of social cooperation.

The lack of consolidating intentions and the tendency to social self-isolation reproduce blaming subjectlessness. The urgency of the formation of regional environment subjectivity cannot be given whomsoever. The influence of regional management system, as well as institutions engaged in regional representation, is irreplaceable in this process.

The fact that, in such a way, the regional environment tends to increase, that gradually, albeit slowly, is formed as a collective subject of social development, one can see prospects of shift of regions management from the administrative-centralized to participial, socio-programmed system. The target function of the management system is increasing which is designed to ensure regional authorities' action in coordination with the center as representatives and those who are interested in the social development of the regions.

Until now, however, a negative impact of regional disparities remains obvious. The policy of redistribution of budgetary resources, mitigates inequalities, but it is mainly "patches" holes and is aimed at promoting social modernization.<sup>12</sup> The formation of regional environment as a subject of social development entails as an important consequence that, first, the region ceases to be a zone of borrowing resources, recipient deprived of desire to build up its own funds. Second, the stability is acquired by the fact that the best coordination mechanisms of the regional authorities and the various regional groups of the society are forming. Third, as for the regional environment it should be also noted that in Russian society fundamental changes have taken place which relate to the fact that the number of paternalistically-spirited and socially depended groups sharply reduced.

In terms of the acquisition of the controlling by regions of a new social quality (transfer of social sphere within the competence of regional management), it is important to

understand that regional authorities cannot solve these problems alone out of mobilizing resources of regional environment. This is not about a resource of patience or conformism. It is much more important to pay tribute to the fact that the regional environment can be considered as a collective self-esteem, self-awareness of the situation in the region and of those problems that are by no means similar for all Russian regions, and demonstrate that the social development of the regions becomes sustainable if starts out from the balance of regional and national interests.

The phenomenon of chronic inefficiency of regional life, reflected both in the minds of officials and the majority of Russians, is closely related to the fact that the regional environment serves only a passive consumer of social goods. The fact that the breakthrough of separate regions (Belgorod, Kaluga regions) suggests otherwise, has a considerable reason. Using either agricultural or professional qualification, or logistical resources, we can achieve considerable results, not pretending to be a leader or a famous example of regional development.

It is important to emphasize that, despite the criticism of the regional elites, or the center, the representatives of the regional environment are not less likely often evaluate their own state negatively as well. Respondents often say about the fact that they are faced with the inertia of regional life, the narrowness of the regional cooperation: they point out that the level of mutual trust and cooperation narrowed down to the scope of the family or friends. These estimating reactions fit well into the society disintegration and that is why the biggest confidence in the institution of the President and quite often indifferent or cautious attitude to the structures of regional government exist.

Believing it is necessary to provide economic and other incentives and preferences to regions, there is a question about the effectiveness of preferential treatment (as evidenced by the unsuccessful yet experience of the Kaliningrad region and the Primorsky Territory), and that the regional environment has not developed criteria for the effectiveness of the management structures in specific situations in specific regional context.

In varying degree, the social development of the Russian regions is uneven. However, it is possible to distinguish substantial enough possibilities for more efficient usage of the regions' capacity for sustainable dynamic development. One mentions the traditional fuel and energy potential, including energy efficiency and

renewable energy sources, raw materials, to a lesser extent – forest resources.<sup>12</sup> But the low assessment of the impact of the regional environment draws attention.

In this situation, the attention is inevitably focused on the quality of regional management and the vagueness of raw line of regional policy, and it is very important, does not contribute to the determining by state of the strategic priorities of regional development.<sup>12</sup>

It is not coincidence that the regional environment remains behind the quotes of expert opinions because a real factor is still present in the methods of social growth quality measuring. Meanwhile, such resource as health becomes significant, because the costs of health care, prevalence of diseases, sanitary-epidemiological situation in the region altogether create conditions for a social breakthrough or aggravate the situation in the social sphere. Besides, the level of aging, alcoholism or drug addiction have a direct impact on the investment attractiveness of the region, making the region an aging or degrading people, contender for a place on the periphery of social development.

## 5. Conclusions

Changes in the geopolitical situation, the transition to high-performance economy make impossible to claim that if the Russian Federation is a self-sufficient country as for its territory and mineral resources, the development of the regions is provided by “leaders”. In our view, having major regional differences this scheme of “locomotive pulling the wagons” is not optimal, since there are serious battles in the distribution of social and economic resources, and recipient regions are in a position of eternal asylums.

Noting that the colossal amount of regional differences relates to the fact that the scheme “the rich – poor” regions is reproduced, and 2/3 of the RF subjects having the proportion of people with incomes below the subsistence level exceeds the Russian average,<sup>12</sup> it can be stated, that the regional environment can, if not radically, then substantially change this situation through the new redefining of movement of technologies and intensity of communications.

Although the presence of persons, the basic income of which is a salary is obvious, regional environment

has sufficient intellectual, social and human potential in order to, in spite of the gaps between the quality of life and resource potential, set ambitious but achievable targets for sustainable social development and to determine in general the consolidation increase of Russia’s space as an adequate response to the risks of destabilizing the economic and social separation of the country.

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