

Regional Power and Society in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Indicators of Integration

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the features of integration and disintegration processes in the interaction of government and society in the context of the immediate global threat caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The authors substantiate the need for the analysis of the interaction between society and government, which is of great theoretical and practical importance for minimizing social dangers, overcoming threats in risk conditions.

Based on the data of the interpretation of the results of an empirical study conducted in 2020 in the Republic of Adygea and the Krasnodar territory, some features and practices of interaction between the government and society in risk conditions were identified; the specifics of the "risk policy" implemented by the government in terms of its influence on (dis)integration processes was determined; the strategies of regional political elites in conditions of uncertainty were differentiated; a system of indicators necessary for the construction of a comprehensive index of (dis)integration in regional society was developed.

Keywords: *Global risk, Coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, Integration, Disintegration, Regional power, Trust in power.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Currently, humanity is facing a new global risk – the spread of COVID-19. In the context of a pandemic that has caused a deep socio-economic crisis, the main responsibility lies with the state authorities, which are called upon both to counteract the spread of the pandemic and to minimize the consequences of the crisis. It is of great importance to build effective interaction between the government and society, to form an effective system for protecting the interests of various social groups and strata, including those affected by the "covid" crisis.

On the one hand, the pandemic has become a test of the mobilization capabilities of the authorities, when the ability of government bodies to respond to the situation in a timely manner and effectively solve current problems is evaluated. Because of this, the discourse of interaction between society and power (vertical dimension) is updated. On the other hand, it is of interest to consider

(dis)integration between individuals as well as different social groups (horizontal dimension).

Integration and disintegration, on the one hand, are opposite processes, and, on the other hand, they are in dialectical and dynamic interaction with each other [1, p.22]. Integration, as a rule, refers to the state or process of combining social phenomena into a single whole, the coexistence of heterogeneous elements of society. From the point of view of P. Sorokin, social integration is based on "factors of the spiritual life of society", which primarily include "the moral unity of people", which is the "driving force of social unity" [2, pp.188-189]. Integration also acts as a process of harmonizing interaction between different social actors.

The UN development Commission has been developing the concept of social inclusion for a number of years. In general, the following understanding was adopted: "social integration is the process of promoting values, attitudes and institutions that allow all people to

participate in social, economic and political life on the basis of equal rights, justice and dignity" [3]. Social integration is characterized by the coincidence of the goals and interests of different individuals and social groups. Similar in meaning and content to this term are the concepts of "consent", "social cohesion", "solidarity", "partnership".

Disintegration, on the contrary, is a process of dissolution of the social whole into separate parts. The most obvious manifestations of social disintegration are the processes of dissolution or disappearance of the general social organization, values, institutions, norms and interests.

From the point of view of D. Cohen, author of the work "Sociology of coronavirus development", the most urgent problems of the post-coronavirus world will be problems of a socio-economic nature, including poverty, economic inequality, unemployment, etc., as well as the strengthening of nationalism and racism. According to the scientist, the scientific community is now called to focus on the study of these problems, since they will become global in nature and become the leading trends in global development [4].

The object of the study is connected with the regional societies of the Republic of Adygea and the Krasnodar territory.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the features of integration and disintegration processes in the interaction of government and society in the context of the immediate global threat caused by the pandemic (on the example of the Republic of Adygea and the Krasnodar territory).

2. METHODOLOGY

The absence of a single generally accepted concept of social integration in the social sciences leads us to the basic provisions of P. Sorokin's sociology on social interaction. Analyzing the views of sociological realism and nominalism, and not agreeing with them, he comes to the conclusion that society, or collective unity, can be represented "as a set of interacting people, different from the simple sum of non-interacting individuals." Society exists "only as a system of interacting units, without which it is unthinkable and impossible, as any phenomenon is impossible without all its constituent elements" [5, p.247]. This provision will be adopted by us as a methodological guideline in understanding interaction as the basis for integration tracks: horizontal and vertical. The first is between citizens, as well as between citizens and civil institutions, the second is between the government and society.

The empirical base of the study. The article presents the results of a sociological survey conducted in September-October 2020 in the Republic of Adygea and

the Krasnodar territory by the questionnaire method (N=1171).

To achieve the purpose, taking into account the existing differences between integration and disintegration trends, we have developed a system of indicators necessary for building a comprehensive index of (dis)integration in regional society. This system of indicators is the basis for identifying common patterns and features of interaction between authorities and society, understanding emerging trends in the face of uncertainty, and detecting problematic aspects in (dis)integration development.

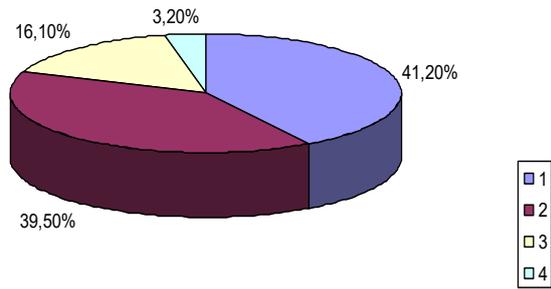
The system of indicators include: unit Information and communication (to measure the degree of openness of the authorities to the society); unit Competence (measure of adequacy (determination, strength) of the decisions); unit Publicity for regional policy (dimension of involvement of various public groups); unit Trust (measure of institutional trust, promises); unit Ethics (measurement evaluations of fairness, humanity, honesty). In our opinion, in conditions of immediate risk, these indicators are able to reflect the main directions of (dis)integration processes. In this article, we will look at some of the indicators whose measurement revealed the most significant results.

3. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Unit Information and communication. During the study, respondents were asked the question "Do you follow the information about the coronavirus pandemic?" As expected, the vast majority of respondents – 80.7% – follow such information, of which 41.2% do it on a daily basis. Interestingly, in the situation of general anxiety, 16.1% of respondents do not follow such information, learning about it by accident, and 3.2% are not interested in this problem at all (figure 1).

Meanwhile, the information received was so contradictory that it was difficult to determine the credibility of certain information and the choice of reliable. The question "Do you trust official information about the current situation in your region?" was answered: 44% trust to some extent and about 40 % do not trust to some extent, 16.1% are undecided. Indicators of trust in official information at this stage are approximately equal to indicators of distrust. The survey data almost exactly repeat the all-Russian data of the study conducted by The public opinion foundation on September 4, 2020: those who trust and do not trust official information about the situation with coronavirus in the country are almost equal in number: 46 and 47% [6]. Experts explain this distribution by the phenomenon of "double message", which is widespread during the pandemic. On the one hand, they officially claim that "there is nothing terrible", on the other hand, they tighten the control and fines for violations. In such conditions, it

is impossible to set the task of increasing public confidence [7].



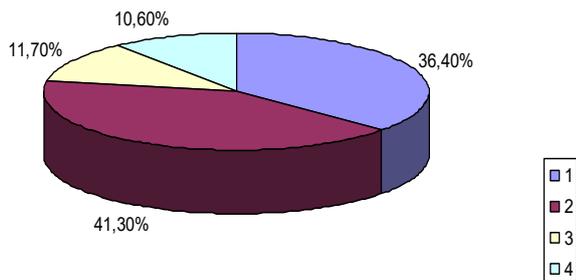
- 1 – follow daily
- 2 – I watch from time to time
- 3 – I do not follow, I find out information by accident
- 4 – I do not follow, because this problem does not interest me

Figure 1 The distribution of answers to the question "Do you follow information about the coronavirus?"

One of the markers reflecting the state of communication with the authorities was the question of satisfaction with the completeness and reliability of information about the pandemic in the region. In general, there are slightly more satisfied respondents (43.7%) than dissatisfied respondents (38.6%).

It can be concluded that the public's assessment of regional information and communication mechanisms from the position of trust in them, as well as their completeness and reliability, can be considered as optimistic, contributing to the establishment of a dialogue through official media channels.

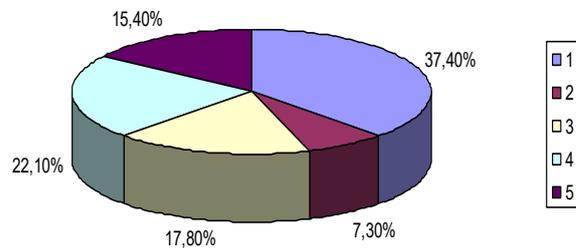
Unit Competence. As a starting point of the analysis, the results of the study were taken to find out how the population assesses the activities of power structures during the pandemic. According to 41.3% of respondents, something was done well, something was bad; 36.4% – generally good; 11.7% – generally bad (figure 2). In conditions of high uncertainty, the authorities did not have "ready-made" solutions, and such an assessment is quite understandable and, in combination with confidently approving opinions, should be considered quite optimistic.



- 1 – overall good
- 2 – something was done well, something bad
- 3 – in general, bad
- 4 – I can't answer

Figure 2 The distribution of answers to the question: "Please evaluate the work of the authorities of your region during the pandemic".

This is also confirmed by the data on the sufficiency of measures taken by the authorities to prevent the spread of coronavirus. 37.4% believe that all necessary measures are being taken; 22.1% believe that the measures taken did not bring the expected result, because their compliance is not monitored; 17.8% believe that the measures taken are not enough (figure 3).



- 1 – all necessary measures are taken
- 2 – the measures taken are too harsh
- 3 – the measures taken are not enough
- 4 – the measures taken did not bring the expected result, because they do not monitor their compliance
- 5 – I can't answer

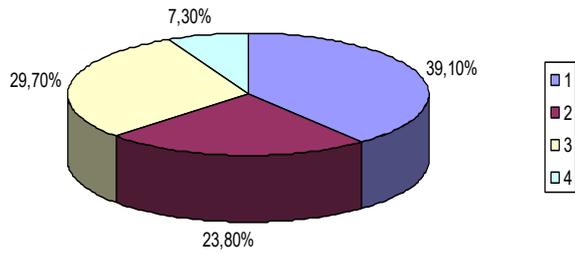
Figure 3 The distribution of answers to the question: "In your opinion, the regional authorities are taking sufficient measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus in your region."

The measures taken by the authorities have not always been effective, but the fight against the pandemic has clearly demonstrated the importance of communication and described it as one of the most important elements of crisis management.

Exploring the problems of public awareness, the interaction between the state and citizens in the context of a pandemic, O.G. Shchenina introduces the concept of "co-awareness", which can be used as an assessment of the potential of "feedback" between the state and citizens [8].

As part of the study, we were interested in the quality of factors of interaction between the government and the population. Among these factors, 39.1% of respondents attributed the need to take public opinion into account when making decisions; 29.7% believe that decisions

should be fair; 23.8% believe that the government should be more open and accessible (figure 4).



- 1 – all necessary measures are taken
- 2 – the measures taken are too harsh
- 3 – the measures taken are not enough
- 4 – the measures taken did not bring the expected result, because they do not monitor their compliance
- 5 – I can't answer

Figure 4 Distribution of answers to the question: "What do you think is necessary for the interaction of the regional authorities with the population to affect the improvement of life?"

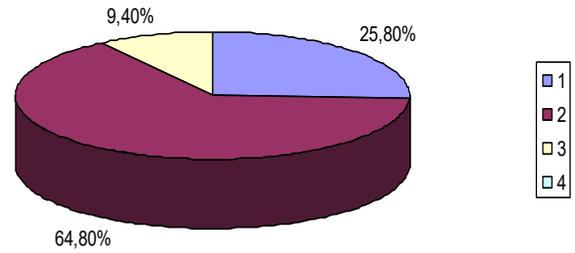
It follows that one of the mechanisms that increase confidence in the authorities in the context of a pandemic is the consideration of public opinion. But, as the study showed, 36% of respondents believe that the government does not take public opinion into account when making decisions.

In general, the assessment of indicators of the competence of regional authorities in the context of the pandemic to a certain extent demonstrates the predominance of paternalistic sentiments: it is the government that is considered as a key actor in the crisis period. But there is also a demand for involving the population in the decision-making process and taking into account their opinions. Predicting the political consequences of the pandemic, Stephen Walt, the Professor at Harvard University, suggests that the pandemic will strengthen state power and nationalism. States of all types will take extraordinary measures to overcome the crisis, and many will not want to give up their new powers after it ends [9].

Unit Trust. Trust, according to F. Fukuyama is a key characteristic of a developed human society, manifested both at the individual level and at the social level (trust in public institutions and the state as a whole). The scientist believes that trust is a property of expectation that arises among members of the community, "that other members will behave more or less predictably, honestly and with attention to the needs of others, in accordance with some general norms" [10, p.52].

Interpersonal trust. It is known that the higher the level of trust between people in society, the higher the

level of social integration processes, the development of the "integration potential of society" [11, p.19-29].



- 1 – most people can be trusted
- 2 – you need to be careful in your relationships with people
- 3 – I can't answer

Figure 5 The distribution of answers to the question "Generally speaking, do you think that most people can be trusted or you need to be very careful in dealing with people?"

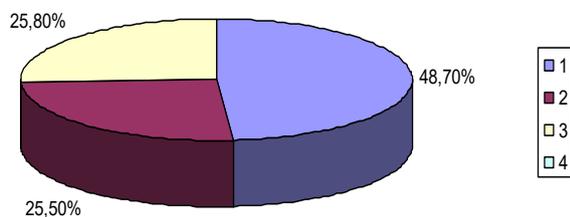
Our study found that 25.8% of respondents, when asked about trusting people, said that most people can be trusted. The answer "you need to be careful in your relationships with people" was chosen by 64.8%, which is 2.5 times more (figure 5). We compared these results with data obtained during the seventh wave of the world values survey (WVS), which has been using this formulation of the question for many years in the study of interpersonal trust. The study of this wave in Russia fell on the "pre-pandemic" period and shows a similar structure of opinions: 22.9% trust the majority of people, 74.4% believe that people need to be careful [12]. We also obtained results differentiated by groups – objects of interpersonal trust: relatives, neighbors, colleagues, acquaintances, service and trade workers, people of other nationalities and religions, and people with whom I met for the first time. For all groups, with the exception of the last one, which is more often not trusted, the most popular choice was "rather trust" (relatives fell into the category of "completely trust").

It should be said that during the pandemic, people did not trust each other less, and the situation of uncertainty did not become a catalyst for a decrease in trust. On the contrary, interpersonal trust still has the potential to become a shaky basis for community cohesion, which compensates for a high degree of risk and uncertainty.

Institutional trust. According to the study, to a greater or lesser extent in the zone of confidence was many organs, structures and institutions except the media, who are in the area of "half-trust" – they do not trust more often than trust. Respondents place the greatest trust in the "personalized institutions" – the President and heads of regions. Also, health organizations and epidemic services have some of the highest indicators: they are

equal to the all-Russian ones, but slightly lower than in the southern Federal district [13]. Obviously, this reflects the request to reduce the anxiety of the population in conditions of uncertainty and the search for institutional reasons for this.

Solidarity. According to K. Larsen, social solidarity – the belief of citizens of a given nation state that they belong to a single moral community, and this allows them to trust each other [14]. In order to measure the direction of horizontal trends of integration and disintegration between different social groups, the questionnaire asked: "Do you think that the pandemic has become a test of humanity, responsiveness, solidarity?" The results show: 48.7% of respondents believe that people are ready and able to help each other in difficult moments, according to 25.8%, people only separated. It is also important to note that 25.5% of respondents found it difficult to answer the question (figure 6).



- 1 – yes, people are ready and able to help each other in difficult moments
- 2 – no, people are only more divided
- 3 – I can't answer

Figure 6 The distribution of answers to the question: "Do you think that the pandemic has become a test for humanity, responsiveness, solidarity?"

It seems to us that this indicates that negative experiences associated with the consequences of the pandemic trigger multidirectional processes: on the one hand, they increase the solidarity of people in the face of a common danger, on the other – they contribute to their disunity. Analyzing these data, it is appropriate to recall the words of A.B. Hoffman that "solidarity, consent, on the one hand, and adherence to common norms, on the other, as two important integrative forms, are combined in civil solidarity, which plays a decisive role in the development of modern society" [15, p.13].

3. CONCLUSIONS

The projection of indicators of integration of regional power and society in public opinion shows that in conditions of direct global risk, the interaction of society and power occurs within the framework of a paternalistic paradigm: the government is recognized as an active actor capable of managing the situation in a crisis period. The assessments of regional information and

communication mechanisms from the position of trust in them, their completeness and reliability are optimistic. An important indicator is the absence of a decline in interpersonal trust during the pandemic, as well as the fact that the situation of uncertainty did not become a catalyst for the decline in institutional trust. At the same time, the expectations addressed to the authorities are quite high and are manifested in the request to take public opinion into account when making decisions, improving the quality of communication. In general, the integration trend is manifested in the preservation of the potential of solidarity of regional communities, which can compensate for a high degree of risk and uncertainty.

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