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Civic Activity – Feminine Activity? Gender, Civil Society and Citizenship in Post-Soviet Russia

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the interconnections between gender, civil society and Political citizenship in contemporary Russia. It asks how masculinity, femininity and their interrelationships are represented in the context of socio-political activity and what kind of gendered agency these representations construct. The analysis is based on interviews with socially and politically active persons in Central Russia.

The main argument in the article is that political space, agency and citizenship in Russia tend to be polarized along gender lines: civic activity is associated with femininity, while institutional politics is considered a masculine territory, and these spheres are represented as quite distinct from each other.

KEY WORDS

citizenship / civil society / gender / Russia

Introduction

The social transformation of Russia has entailed rearticulating the Relationship between the state and civil society and between public and private spheres, and, consequently, changes in the conditions of citizenship. The reorganization of gender relations and the sexual division of labour, space and power are playing key roles in this process.

This article examines interconnections between gender, civil society and political citizenship in contemporary Russia. Civil society and its preconditions have attracted renewed attention in the academic community as a result of the democratization of the former socialist societies. However, two important dimensions in the current scholarly discussion on post-Soviet civil societies have been neglected. First, research has mainly concentrated either on theoretical and conceptual discussions of civil society (Volkov, 1997; Watson, 1997) or on studying various forms of socio-political activism using quantitative research methods (Green, 2002; Markova, 1999). In contrast, there is a lack of empirically grounded qualitative analyses that shed light on the civic activists' own interpretations of their activity. The need for such studies is manifested, for example, in numerous studies dealing with the difficult encounters between 'East' and 'West', especially in the context of the women's movement (Funk and Mueller, 1993; Scott et al., 1997) and of 'democracy aid' (Sampson, 1996; Wedel, 1997).

Second, previous analyses of the gendered aspects of civil society are limited. An exception is the Russian women's movement, which has been studied empirically quite extensively by Sperling (1999), Kay (2000), Temkina (1997) and others. However, there is a lack of empirical research focusing not only on women's organizations but also on other socio-political organizations and on the experiences and accounts of both male and female activists. Such studies are needed in order to draw some general conclusions about women's and men's socio-political activism and about the gendering practices in organized socio-political life in Russia.

This article aims to address these thus far neglected dimensions by using qualitative research methods to study civic activity and political citizenship from a gender perspective. I examine how masculinity, femininity and their interrelationships are represented in the context of socio-political activity. I ask what kind of gendered meanings are given to civic organizations (*obshchestvennye/ gosudarstvennye organizatsii*) and institutional politics and what kind of gendered agency they produce.

The main argument put forward here is that political space, agency and Citizen identities are gendered in such a way that civic activity is discursively constructed as feminine and institutional politics as masculine. These spheres are portrayed as quite separated from each other. I suggest that the association of civic activity with femininity has, in part, been produced by the shifts in discourses in conceptualizing civil society in Russia.

I study this topic on the basis of data gathered in the provincial town of Tver' located in the vicinity of Moscow.¹ The analysis is based on 33 Thematic interviews with 43 socially and politically active persons conducted during six months in 2001-2002.² The interviewees represent three groups of actors:
civic activists (26 interviews), local civil servants co-operating with civic organizations (4 interviews), and foreign donor agencies financing civic activities (3 interviews).

The civic activists mainly represent the following organizations: a feminist organization, a human rights organization, and a local branch of the trade union of medical workers. In addition, some members of a veterans' organization, a non-feminist women's organization and a sports organization were interviewed.