

“Political participation: Model by Verba in the EU and Russia”

Introduction

Democracy is a political system based on 1) representative government; 2) citizen participation in the political process; 3) freedom (in the wide sense; basic freedoms of citizens); 4) transparency of political acts and process in general. If you ask a political scientist what are the main characteristics of democracy, among all these principals it is quite probable to hear also the fact of existing developed civil society. And this answer will be as far logic as civil society is considered to be a "product" of democracy because it is the system that provides all the necessary terms and conditions for civil society institutions and also the people who make them work. So, while saying that citizen participation in the political process is one of the main principals democracy built on, we should remember that citizen participation is also the basic feature of functioning effectively civil society.

The traditional model of political participation was formulated by Sidney Verba, American political scientist, based on the American politics. Let us look at the definitions.

Political participation: definitions

"Political participation affords citizens in a democracy an opportunity to communicate information to government officials about their concerns and preferences and to put pressure on them to respond"¹. It means that in any democratic system citizens have the right to express their views and attitudes towards almost everything happening in the public sphere or concerning their own interests in a way that governmental officials know this and respond.

In American politics the most widespread way of expressing own views is voluntary political participation. By this term the political scientists (and particularly Verba) mean that this includes "activities that have the intent or effect of influencing

¹ Verba et al. Voice and Equality. Civic Voluntarism in American Politics. London: Harvard UP. 1995.

government action - either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make these policies; that participation is not obligatory and receives no pay or only token financial compensation"²; and the last thing is that it is not just being attentive to politics (watching news, discussing politics with friends etc.), but "doing politics"³.

In European politics citizen participation is one of the key points as the representative democracies of nation states are said to transform into participatory democracies at the supranational level (though the principle of representation remains as one of the fundamental democratic characteristics). But the thing is that the participation is mainly understood as a process connected with the representative bodies like the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council of Ministers, which are accountable to national parliaments, elected by their citizens. It was written in the draft of Euro Constitution that "these mechanisms give every citizen the right to *participate* in the democratic life of the EU"⁴. So the basic point of participation in this sense is voting. Actually, it happens this way because within the EU the nation states do matter because they are more significant, more developed in political sense than the EU as a political structure or system still being under changes - so all the citizen participation actually takes place at the nation-state level, not at the EU-level. Dahrendorf writes that if "people want to have their say, and we cannot even imagine how to do that at the supranational level, except through street demonstrations or through the media, undoubtedly influential methods but with highly doubtful legitimacy; or else through discussion on the Internet, which is important but certainly not democratic, if only because many people, starting with myself, do not take part"⁵. Are there any other really effective forms of political participation in the EU?

² Verba et al. *Voice and Equality. Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. London: Harvard UP. 1995.

³ Verba et al. *Voice and Equality. Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. London: Harvard UP. 1995.

⁴ Hix S. *The Political System of the European Union*. London: Macmillan press. 2005. – 116.

⁵ Dahrendorf R. *The Challenge for Democracy*// *Journal of Democracy*. 2003. № 14 (4). – 107.

Several words have to be said about Russia. Political participation is quite a problematic issue there. Almost the only way to participate in political process is to vote through elections. Demonstrations and marches are officially forbidden and only those, which have come all the bureaucratic steps to get the permit to take place, may occur. The mass-media is not free in the classic liberal approach and it is not able to express the views of ordinary people or just fair views as it usually belongs to the people who have connections to those who have power. As for NGOs and NPOs, they always risk to be abolished if their activities somehow are opposed to the governmental activities. The question in this case is not if there are any effective ways for citizens to participate in political process, the question is if any ways do exist at least or not. As a matter of fact, civil society in Russia is very weak and lacks the capacity to resist the state and the government. It may be explained by the historical background: the democracy as a political system emerged in the country in the early 90s and before there was monarchy, then totalitarian and authoritarian types of rule, so there weren't any prerequisites for establishing civil society, and now the "democratic wave" fell again and some authoritarian tendencies take place.

Types of political participation

"Americans who wish to take part in politics can be active in many ways. Although voting is an important mode of citizen involvement in political life, it is but one of many political acts"⁶. There is quite a wide list of activities undertaken by American public. It includes the following types of political participation:

1. Voting
2. Working in and contributing to electoral campaigns and organizations
3. Contacting government officials
4. Attending protests, marches, or demonstrations
5. Working informally with the others to solve some community problem
6. Serving without pay on local elected and appointed boards
7. Being active politically through the intermediation of voluntary associations

⁶ Verba et al. *Voice and Equality. Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. London: Harvard UP. 1995.

8. Contributing money to political causes in response to mail solicitations⁷.

As we may see there is a clear structure of political activities undertaken by citizens in the USA. The list is not hierarchical, though it is quite obvious that voting is the easiest way to participate in political life. Besides, this list of activities is not just declarative, everything is implemented in practice. Citizens of the USA choose the way to participate in political life due to their possibilities, skills and recourses. S. Verba divides citizen political acts into three categories based on 1) requirements for activity; 2) level of capacity for conveying information; 3) variation of pressure on policymakers made by activity. The classification, in my opinion, reflects one important feature of political life in States – freedom of choice. Moreover, it shows how effective the whole system of political participation is as if there are possibilities for everyone to find his or her niche in the participation process. First, as skills, time or money needed for taking part in political life, anyone who has any of listed resources may be active. For instance, if person has money, he or she may donate and work for electoral campaigns. If he or she has some skills to introduce himself or herself, to be convincing and easy to communicate, he or she can contact an official, and so on. The examples are simple and illustrative. Second, everyone may choose if they want to be anonymously active or in public: they may go to polls and follow the elections or attend a demonstration. And the last thing to be mentioned is that the person may also choose how effective he or she wants to be in his activity, whether it influences straightly the policy-maker or indirectly, for example by voting or contacting a politician.

In the EU people can participate in the political process by voting, signing petitions, wearing buttons, demonstrations, boycotts, contacting politicians - but they do it at the national level, not on at the supranational. That's the obvious problem that nowadays gradually is being solved. The EU originally formed as economic and national union is not yet working as political organism though it has political institutions and bodies which are to work at supranational level. From this angle the

⁷ Verba et al. *Voice and Equality. Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. London: Harvard UP. 1995.

activities remain more “possible”, hypothetical than real, especially in case of contacting political officials. The most effective way to participate in political life of the EU is taking part in elections and referendums (e.g. referendum for the EU Constitution). It is quite probable that in a few years the situation will change, as the EU as a political system hasn't reached its final forms, it is still being under reconstruction and changing from day to day.

In case of Russia, the only thing that can make the civil society strong and citizens involved into political life is changing the whole political system. But who knows when it happens. In my opinion the system changes as the citizens feel this way – that changes are needed urgently, but the question is when the patience ends. People who have never been accustomed to freedom, to the term of human rights, to the possibility to express the opinions and views so that they would be taken into consideration by policymakers just have no understanding what is political participation and why it is needed. Maybe in some decades, when the soviet echo of political tradition dies, there will be a new democratic Russia with effective civil society, with people eager to influence the political process so that their preferences and concerns will be taken into account.

Conclusion

While thinking about political participation as a concept of democracy and looking at the examples of political participation in the EU and Russia, I've come up to several conclusions.

First, there is an obvious correlation between the political system and level of citizen participation on political life. The important thing is what the institutional design is, whether it is originally democratic, being under reformation or democracy is like a decoration for authoritarian system. In the case of the US model civil society is strong and political participation is widely developed and quite effective, in second case (the EU) civil society is already well organised, but citizens don't have yet a big variety of chances to influence political process, and in third case (Russia) civil society is weak and citizens take almost no part in political life. Moreover, citizens

do participate in political life if the political institutes allow them to do it and they do not participate if political institutes are more concentrated on representation rather than participation.

Second, I should say that political participation depends on the way the people think and if they take the responsibility to be active, if they have had such experience before. In the USA the traditions of democracy are strong and stable, people live with the understanding that they have the right to express their interests. In the EU participation at supranational level is quite new and everything is not so clear and people may be not that sure how to participate in these new conditions. As for Russia people just never had the possibility to participate, so they cannot imagine what sense is located in the participation process.

Third conclusion is related to the two previous, as I have thought about the nature of political participation. Of course it depends on the type of political system and historical background which influenced the people's way of thinking in time. But there is also another factor of great importance appear when I look at the term "voluntary". The thing is how citizen personally apprehends his own place and role in political process, if he or she really wants to participate or he or she is absolutely indifferent, if he or she has this life philosophy that he or she has to fight for his or her rights and views or not.

To sum up, I should say that citizen participation in political process is always not only the proclaimed right written in the Constitution, but also the personal willingness to participate.

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