

# ROUND TABLE: SOCIETY AND SOCIOLOGY IN MODERN RUSSIA

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## Importance of sociological knowledge at the present stage of development of the Russian society



**Mikhail Vladimirovich  
MOREV**

Ph.D. in Economics, Research Associate, Head of the Laboratory, Federal State-Financed Scientific Institution the Institute of Socio-Economic Development of Territories of the Russian Academy of Sciences (56A, Gorky Street, Vologda, 160014, Russia, 379post@mail.ru)

**Abstract.** The article considers the reasons that determine the importance of data obtained in the course of sociological research. The author shows the role of sociological knowledge as one of the key factors in consolidation and development of modern Russian society.

**Key words:** sociological knowledge, social development, consolidation, public opinion, public administration.

Modern Russian society is on the verge of fundamental changes. In our opinion, they touch upon not only economic, but also cultural, moral and ideological sides of life. Today sociology, the issues it considers and the information it gives, play a particularly significant role. Considering sociological knowledge as one of key factors in the country development, we mean a new milestone in the development of Russian sociology. The reasons are discussed in this article.

*First*, Russia experienced indigenous breaking of the development paradigm in the

1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed. At that time the state did not need information about public perception of the state, the assessment of their reforms; there was no clearly formulated question for the scientific community. Sociological studies were often subject to marketing goals. The consequences of “the raucous 1990s” are still felt in the development of the economic and demographic situation, and largely due to this period the Russians have such social perception. For example, the modern idea of the Russian society development is mainly

In your opinion, how successful is the RF President in coping with challenging issues?  
(as a percentage of the number of respondents)

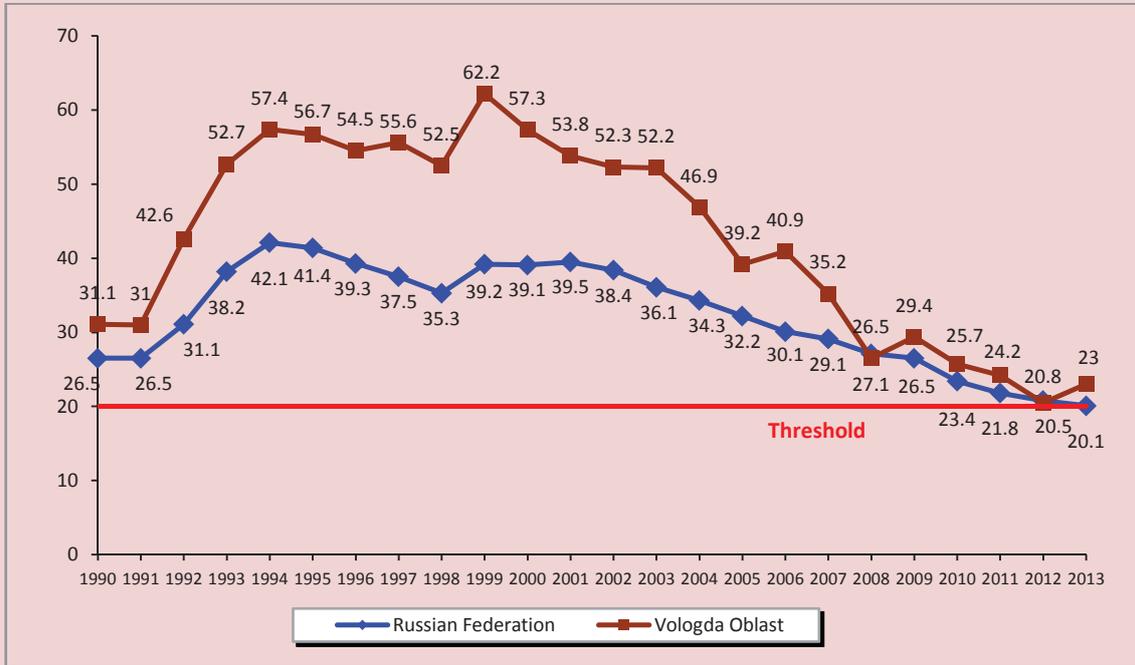
Indicator	2000	2005	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Change in 2013 +/- to	
										2000	2012
<i>Strengthening Russia's international standing</i>											
Successful	42.3	47.9	58.4	55.1	49.5	49.9	46.2	43.1	45.6	+3	+3
Unsuccessful	30.9	33.8	24.9	23.7	30.4	29.3	33.7	37.9	36.2	+5	-2
<i>Imposing order in the country</i>											
Successful	31.4	41.9	53.2	48.2	39.1	41.1	36.6	35.4	39.4	+8	+4
Unsuccessful	49.2	45.1	34.0	34.2	43.5	42.5	50.0	50.7	47.5	-2	-3
<i>Protecting democracy and strengthening the citizens' freedoms</i>											
Successful	23.5	33.6	44.4	39.9	36.7	36.3	32.4	28.8	31.8	+8	+3
Unsuccessful	43.8	47.0	37.0	35.9	41.5	42.6	48.3	52.3	51.0	+7	-1
<i>Economic recovery and increase in the citizens' welfare</i>											
Successful	25.6	35.1	47.2	36.7	31.6	33.5	30.7	28.5	31.3	+6	+3
Unsuccessful	52.9	50.8	39.1	46.0	52.4	51.6	56.1	57.9	56.8	+4	-1
Source: <i>monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya ISERT RAN</i> [ISED T RAS public opinion monitoring].											

associated with the increased role of the state in almost all key areas of public life: social, economic, cultural, etc. (hence, the question appears about how to improve the efficiency of public administration). The anti-social results of the reforms in the 1990s and impoverishment of the population have become a basis for positive socio-political trends of the Russian society: the society is aware of the social hopelessness of radical reforms and the need to adopt new ways of development, taking into account the interests of most Russian citizens [4, p. 11]. V. Putin's policy, aimed at strengthening the vertical of power, got broad public support that was a logical consequence of the population's "fatigue" of economic instability and mistrust of government. Strong

government was popular in the early 2000s, and remains relevant in the present time. Not surprisingly, the President's actions to restore order in the country and enhance its international standing were always valued higher than the actions to defend democracy and facilitate freedoms of citizens (table). In addition, according to ISED T RAS surveys<sup>1</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> ISED T RAS has been carrying out the Public opinion monitoring since 1996 once in two months in Vologda, Cherepovets, and in eight districts of the oblast (Babayevsky District, Velikoustyugsky District, Vozhegodsky District, Gryazovetsky District, Kirillovsky District, Nikolsky District, Tarnogsky District and Sheksninsky District). The volume of a sample population is 1500 people aged from 18 and older. Representativeness of the sample is ensured by the observance of the proportions between the urban and rural population, the proportions between the inhabitants of settlements of various types (rural communities, small and medium-sized cities), age and sex structure of the oblast's adult population. The method of the survey is a questionnaire poll by place of residence of respondents. Sampling error does not exceed 3%.

Mortality rate from suicide in Russia and the Vologda Oblast (per 100 thousand people)



Source: Baza dannykh Federal'noi sluzhby gosudarstvennoi statistiki [Database of the Federal State Statistics Service]. Available at: [www.gks.ru](http://www.gks.ru).

in 2000–2013 20–28% of the Vologda Oblast population considered the issues to restore order in the country as priority for Russia’s President, 26–35% – the issues to strengthen Russia’s international standing. Only 6–10% of the population in the region believed that the head of state was concerned with the problem of democratic rights and freedoms, however, more than 60% of the region’s residents supported the President during the period under study.

It is also important to note that the Soviet Union collapse was primarily a problem of psychological character. There is the following evidence: a dramatic increase in the number of social pathologies (including youth),

and, particularly, of suicides. Its rate still exceeds the critical indicator set by the World Health Organization (figure). The economic consequences of the crises, levelling off much faster than the consequences of social maladjustment of a person [3] are complex in nature and reflected in almost all spheres of public life.

The low level of trust to the public authorities, social atomism, social fragmentation, political indifference, the low level of civil society development, inactivity of civic and political participation are those problems that modern Russian society “inherited” from the 1990s. These problems would be avoided if the Russians

preserved the feeling that they could influence the situation in the country, they had their own voice and that voice could be heard in the higher echelons of power. Sociological science should and could solve the problems, if the state were interested.

Today sociology and authorities face mostly similar tasks. The President urges to strengthen the vertical of power, consolidate the society and strive for a national idea and increase the role of society in making management decisions.

Hence, the authorities are aware that the consolidation of society, overcoming of the “gap” between the population and the state is the only way to maintain order in the country and credibility to the current political course of development in general (which is especially important in the framework of modernization, but also on the background of instability on the international political arena).

*Second*, sociological knowledge, disclosing the relationship of social processes and phenomena taking place in the society, considers the subjective factor of social development, which, according to J.T. Toshchenko, “plays a significant and increasingly important role among the factors that determine the content and the vector of changes in the world and in our country” [6, p. 32].

It is obvious that the official statistics does not provide a complete picture of the society development. For example, numerous studies show that macroeconomic indicators do not always reflect the real level of the

state development; the high level of income does not always guarantee satisfaction with life; the growth of wealth is not always accompanied by the signs of increasing happiness [7, p. 137]. But this is a global practice.

In Russia, and especially at the present stage of social development, the role of the “subjective factor” and, accordingly, of sociological knowledge, reflecting its essence, is growing. This is facilitated by at least three simultaneously acting factors.

*The first one is specific features of Russian mentality.* As according to the RF President V.V. Putin, it is “our genetic code”, based on values, ideas of the highest moral purpose of a man, some higher moral principles [5]. In the last 20–25 years, these values were not popular in the Russian society: in the 1990s – due to the instable economic situation and the specifics of the spiritual and value priorities of that time; in the 2000s – due to the society’s striving for stabilization in the broad sense of the word (stabilization of the economy, quality of life, overcoming of negative trends in the demographic situation, social sphere, etc.).

However, being the essential features of the national character, they could not disappear, and existed at the latent level. As a result, according to M.K. Gorshkov, post-reform Russia concentrated a huge socio-psychological resource, serving as a basis for the modernization breakthrough, which the Russian society needs desperately today, [2, p. 6]. Only nowadays “the genetic code” of the Russian society (returning to the President’s

words) is considered as “one of our main competitive advantages in today’s world”.

*This awareness at all government levels is the second factor to make sociological knowledge relevant.* The ideology, based on scientific knowledge, can be regarded as realistic. Otherwise, it is illusory [8].

*The third factor* is a time factor. The public polls have revealed the rapid growth of the population’s support for the President’s activities. The positive trends (albeit less vivid) are observed in relation to other authorities. However, it is clear that public opinion today largely depends on how the situation is developing in Ukraine, what political stance the President has in relations with Kiev, the United States and some Western European countries. Russian and foreign organizations, engaged in the study of public opinion, note that the consolidation processes unfold against this background.

In other words, the Russian society is consolidated due to “external threats”, and the greater the threat, the more mass media provides information about the economic sanctions of the West or flagrant actions of Kiev authorities, the more cohesive the Russian society becomes, the more it supports the state. The society denounces the policy of Kiev and advances conceptual ideas about the contrast between Western and Russian civilizations.

But, in our opinion, no state should and can build long-term plans and forecasts, based on the figures of official statistics and, especially, the data of sociological surveys,

which take place in the conditions of the key factors that do not depend on internal political decisions. Consolidation of the Russian society under the influence of the “external factor” (the situation in Ukraine) is natural and obvious; however, in our opinion, this phenomenon is temporary.

To assess the actual convergence of the state and society, as well as representatives of various social strata, it is necessary to analyze the situation when the state is focused on solving urgent problems of the population, such as the increase in the standard of living and quality of life, social development, etc.

So, it is better to consider the trends of public opinion in retrospect. The sociological surveys results show that the assessment of the authorities before “Ukrainian events” was not so positive. During the 2000s when the population raised questions not about relations with the West, but about growth in salaries and pensions, the level of approval of key state institutions remained unchanged (increased support was not more than 5% per year) and during the presidency of D.A. Medvedev even decreased (from 76 to 64%, according to VTSIOM, from 73 to 52%, according to ISED T RAS).

The beginning of the third term of Putin’s presidency was accompanied by a slight increase in the level of approval, but it was short-term. As a consequence, in 2013 the level of approval of V. Putin was 54–56%, according to ISED T RAS, and 60–63%, according to VTSIOM, and this figure did not change significantly.

Thus, the data of sociological studies warn that after the resolution of the crisis in Ukraine, the problems of living standards growth, overcoming inequality, social protection and social justice will become relevant again and the government will have to manage them, because the social patience of the Russians may be not as great as in the early and mid-2000s.

The simultaneous impact of the above factors – specificity of sociological knowledge, its demand on the part of authorities and need to act “for the future” – gives an opportunity to speak about the conditions under which social science can and should become a key

element in mediating between the state and society and thus contribute to the further process of social development. According to M.K. Gorshkov, “we get used to a fairly mild formula “sociological support”... but I think that is not enough, we need a more deep and serious look at this interaction. This is not about support, but about real, meaningful inclusion. And not when we have to deal with inconsistent management decisions, but preferably in the earlier stages, when the solution is only ripening... We are talking about “social participation”, at least, we insist on this term now, and I think it should be even strengthened in the future” [1].

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