



Religiosity, Social Capital and Civic Engagement: Cluster Effects on Russian Undergraduate Programmes

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Abstract

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In spite of the significant growth in the number of students over the last 20 years, Russia is still considered to be a country with a low level of civic engagement. Our study aims to respond to this contradictory standing and to explain the causes of student civic engagement. The survey conducted in 10 state HEIs has shown a difference in Civic Engagement Index values among students from four educational programmes. The results of linear regression models have shown that in addition to the 'pure effect' of the educational programme, such factors as religiosity and social capital influence student civic engagement.

Presentation

Religiosity, Social Capital and Civic Engagement of Russian Undergraduates: Cluster Effects of Educational Programmes

Introduction

Higher education is recognized as one of the main sources of civic participation and public benefit across countries. Various studies have shown that education brings positive effects as it stimulates economic growth, reduces crime, increases the level of social capital, civic participation and safety, etc. (Almond, Verba 1963; Putnam 2000; McMahon 2009; Hout 2012). It has been revealed in cases within different countries that college or university attendance increases civic participation as well as membership in various associations, organisations and informal groups, not only during the school years, but also after leaving the organized places of education (Healey 2005; Campbell 2006; Ishitani, McKittrick 2013).

In comparison with many developed and developing countries, Post-Soviet Russia can be considered a specific case where two contradictory trends could be observed during the 1990's and after 2000: an increasing number of students and population with higher education and a decreasing level of social wellbeing (OECD Better Life Index 2012). Negative trends could be observed when looking at general social and economic differentiation, as well as low level of community involvement and political participation among youth and adults. The question which arises is how to explain such a contradictory situation on the institutional level of the higher educational system.

Civic effects of education were highly neglected in post-Soviet countries including Russia where economic returns were considered to be the main expected outcome of higher education during a period of financial and political downturn (Andrushchak, Prudnikova 2012). The collapse of the Soviet Union made it possible to start from scratch and expand new educational programmes (or specialties), such as Economics, Management, Theology that were highly unfavourable for the previous political regime. Nevertheless, little attention was paid to the general relationship between students' civic engagement and new forms of knowledge and transmission of values during the post-Soviet transition.

Our study is aimed at objectifying the civic effects of higher education in Russia, and explaining the causes of civic engagement of students from different educational areas (specializations). The key hypothesis of current research was formulated, referring to a classical study by P. Jacob on changing values in college (Jacob, 1957). He has shown that educational programmes cultivated different values and patterns of behaviour that have a certain impact on engagement among students. For example, while programmes in Economics and Management cultivate values and patterns of professional development and social mobility, programmes in Theology and the Humanities provide students with humanistic and community values and patterns of civic engagement (Nussbaum 2010; Ishitani, McKittrick 2013). To test this hypothesis we conducted an empirical study of students' civic engagement in 10 Russian universities.

Conceptualisation

In our study we combine the concepts of civic engagement, student involvement and social capital in a general model of educational impact. In this section we clarify the usage of these concepts.

Civic engagement

In spite of general confusion about the notions of civic engagement and civic culture, due to various definitions and lack of consensus among authors from different intellectual fields, it is important to provide some basic distinctions that can help to clarify our research model. Besides, it is also important to define conceptually the role of organized learning in the construction of civic action, especially when it goes in parallel with religion and social capital as predictors of civic participation (Putnam 2007).

First of all, it is important to distinguish civic and political engagement, although more and more papers, especially in post-Soviet countries, tend to use these different concepts as interchangeable. In several papers by Almond, Verba, Nie, the distinction was drawn between the notion of political engagement as influencing public policy and the notion of civic engagement as participatory culture, but mostly not public policy (Almond, Verba 1963; Verba, Nie 1972; Burns, Schlozman, Verba 2001). Another

version of this distinction is between conflictual and non-conflictual or cooperative activities, such as volunteering and membership in service organisations that can't lead directly to political ends and goals such as for example protest activities (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, 1995). It does not mean that civic and political participation are independent. They are interrelated through various channels and complex ties that are usually neglected. For example, civic activities can lead to political engagement and vice versa (Kamens, 1988), but they can also be counterparts when civic activities are not oriented towards public representation and more close connections between students and communities. Verba and his colleagues have found that civic skills work as an important factor in political engagement, but are transmitted through non-political channels (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, 1995). Many authors include the political component in the notion of civic engagement. But for our research we decided to separate these phenomena. Although the questionnaire contains several indicators on participation in political life, presidential elections, etc., they should be analyzed separately from civic engagement in the sense of social initiative participation, volunteering, helping behaviour and values.

Along with general positive effects of education on economy and society, various institutional forms of civic education and service learning have been implemented in colleges and universities over the last half century. Their impact has been also examined in various quantitative and qualitative studies. Studies conducted over the last decades have demonstrated that education can represent such factors (relevant for high schools and universities) as civic skills, curriculum, classroom climate, pedagogical method (Campbell 2006). In his famous study P. Jacobs also claimed that a combination of curriculum, instructor, teaching methods and the so called cultural or moral 'climate' of institutions influences student values (Jacobs 1957). These elements (open climate in class, student parliament, learning through participating, regular discussions, etc.) of organized learning can work as strong facilitators for volunteering and participation in civic activities not only during the period of formal education but also later during the period of adulthood. So academic programmes were found to significantly impact civic engagement not only during college but also after college (Ishitani, McKittrick 2013).

Student involvement

Apart from educational program characteristics as an objective feature, subjective factors also play a crucial role. An educational programme has a significant impact only if a student is involved in the educational process. On the other hand, strong involvement in the process of learning might leave no time for a student to be engaged in civic / volunteering initiatives.

The theory of student involvement is rooted in the results of empirical studies which have shown that a college environment significantly affects a student's persistence in college and dropout from higher education institutions (Astin 1984; Tinto 1975). The factors which contributed to persistence in college (living in a campus residence, social fraternities and sororities, extracurricular activities, sports, participation in research projects, etc.) could all be interpreted in terms of increased engagement (Astin 1984: 523).

Student involvement can be understood as energy (physical and psychological) and effort that a student puts into his training (Astin 1984; Newmann 1992). Nevertheless, researchers note the importance of students' observed behaviour, as it is rather problematic to track their psychological state of mind.

Initially, research on student involvement / engagement emphasized "academic learning time" and "time-on-task", but later a broader understanding of this concept appeared. Now it also includes elements that are not directly related to students' academic performance. For example, it includes participation in extracurricular, optional activities at the university, active collaborative learning, and communication with professors and other students, etc. (Coates 2006).

S. Mann understands involvement as an inverse of the concept of alienation, that is isolation from the university community, processes or activities in which he/she might be involved (Mann 2001). Thus, student involvement is understood as engagement of students in two dimensions – academic/learning activities and social integration in the university environment.

One of the most advanced approaches to student involvement measurement has been developed in the framework of the USA National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). More than 1,500 different colleges and universities in the United States and Canada participated in the NSSE, which was first

conducted in 2000. As a tool for student involvement measurement this research project uses questions about the frequency of participation in various university practices (extracurricular activities, participation in seminars, working on assignments with classmates, preparation for classes, etc.). Student engagement was defined there in terms of five benchmarks (2000-2012): Level of academic challenge, Active and collaborative learning, Student–faculty interaction, Supportive campus environment, and Enriching educational experiences. Since 2013 the survey items were reorganized into a system of ten Engagement Indicators grouped within four themes: Academic challenge, Learning with peers, Experiences with faculty, Campus environment. Additionally, a selected set of items is reported separately as High-impact practices (NSSE 2014).

Social capital

Social capital proves to be an important concept connected with civic engagement (Woolcock 2011). Among many definitions of social capital, R. Putnam offers one that is most appropriate for our research. He defines social capital as a resource embedded in social contacts: “Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam 2000: 19).

The higher the level of trust in society, the lower the transaction costs for taking joint actions to produce public benefit, and the higher the probability of cooperation between people. So, civic engagement under such conditions will increase.

If there exist social ties between people, especially heterogeneous ones (which correspond to the notion of bridging social capital), it increases the probability that they can be utilized in civic engagement initiatives, so we also expect a positive relationship.

Putnam's main thesis is that over the past few decades, the social capital of Americans has dropped significantly, and it is necessary to restore it. In order to substantiate the second – socio-political part of the thesis, Putnam describes the positive effects of social capital: economic prosperity, subjective well-being and health, safer environment, democracy, etc. To prove the first part of the thesis (a decrease in social capital indicators), Putnam analyzes trends in various areas of public life in which social capital can manifest itself: political participation and civic engagement, participation in religious organisations, formal and informal social connections, altruism, volunteering, trust, honesty, reciprocity, etc.

At first glance it may seem that in the section of the book, which describes these trends, Putnam does not distinguish between the social capital itself, the actions associated with investing in social capital (sources) and its social consequences. Although the consequences / effects (both positive and negative) of social capital are separated in the fourth part of the book, they are also present in the section, which describes the changes in social capital volume. For example, volunteering, political and civic participation are described here rather as effects. If social capital in its various forms is present in a society, it is not divided, there are enough social connections, norms of generalized reciprocity are developed, people trust each other, then it increases political participation, civic involvement and participation in voluntary initiatives, as social resources are necessary for the organisation of such activities. The need to differentiate between the resources, their sources and consequences has been mentioned by A. Portes (1998), N. Lin (1999) and other authors. Although this distinction is not very important for Putnam's thesis because everything is decreasing - both the resources themselves and their (mostly positive) effects, he also mentions the need to distinguish these phenomena while introducing the concept, and stresses that the very essence of social capital is its social network character. Starting the chapter on such social capital indicators as altruism, volunteering, and philanthropy, Putnam emphasizes the distinction between "doing with" and "doing for": "Social capital refers to the networks of social connection – doing with. Doing good for other people, however laudable, is not part of the definition of social capital” (Putnam 2000: 116-117).

However, for our analysis, this distinction becomes crucial, because one of these indicators (namely, civic engagement) is the dependent variable in the models described in the paper, while the other one (social capital) is an independent variable. If we refer to civic engagement as an indicator of social capital, there is a danger of tautological statements. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the difference between these phenomena, which allows us to say that one of them is the cause, and the

other one is a consequence. We accept the premise that social capital (as a resource by definition) does not include civic engagement, it is rather one of the sources for civic engagement, a necessary condition for it to develop. Nevertheless, the relationship between these two variables is still a far more complicated matter than just a one-way causal relationship. Rather, there is a reciprocal influence (Brehm, Rahn 1997; Claibourn, Martin 2000): civic engagement, altruism, willingness to help others in turn increase the social capital of a community. The regression models presented in this paper cannot themselves answer the question about the main causality direction. Answering this question would require another type of data – at least a longitudinal survey and experimental design. However, our data still allows us to make a meaningful conclusion: that the relationship between social capital and civic engagement indicators is present and is very strong.

Data, methods and operationalisation

The analysis is based on data collected in 2013 in 10 Russian state HEIs, located in 9 Russian regions (Belgorod, Vladivostok, Kursk, Lipetsk, Moscow, Omsk, Pyatigorsk, Ryazan, Tula). During lectures the students were asked to fill out our questionnaires. On average, we collected about 260 questionnaires in each university (2530 respondents in total). Several questionnaires were removed from the database after an adequacy check. The analysis presented in this paper is carried out among full-time students (1905 respondents). Students in other educational forms were not represented in all of the 10 HEIs, so we decided not to include them in our analyses. Respondents with missing data have been excluded from the analysis as well.

The question about educational programme was open-ended. The answers were recoded into several educational areas (specializations) in accordance with the grouping of specializations within Federal state educational standards: Economics and Management, Theology, Humanities, Pedagogy and education.

We also have a small group of students whose specialization could not be attributed to any of the educational groups mentioned above. These students were assigned a code, "other educational areas".

The resulting database contains 214 full-time students in Theology, 834 students in Economics and Management, 415 in Pedagogy and education, 380 in the Humanities, and 62 students in other educational areas.

To compare the students studying at different educational programmes several indices were constructed. A *Civic Engagement Index* was constructed as a mean average of six variables. The questions can be found in the *Appendix*. To justify that the index is consistent, reliability analysis was conducted. Originally we had several more questions included in the index. But gradually some of the variables were excluded to increase the value of Cronbach's alpha. As a result, 6 variables remained. The resulting index is consistent (Chronbach's Alpha = 0.7). The higher the index value, the higher the level of civic engagement.

We used two *social capital* indicators: the composition (heterogeneity) of social support networks and generalized trust. These two indicators correspond to two key forms of social capital in Putnam's sense: the existence of social ties and the level of trustworthiness of the social surroundings (See *Appendix*).

We relied on the methodology for student involvement assessment, implemented in the NSSE and adapted for Russian educational institutions by the Monitoring Center at the Higher School of Economics (Maloshonok 2014).

Six *student involvement* indices were constructed on the basis of two sets of questions. The first set of 18 questions about the frequency of student participation in academic and social activities at the university was divided into five groups on the basis of exploratory factor analysis (Principal component analysis with Quartimax rotation). The resulting factors explain 61% of total variance (additional information on the factor analysis results and Student involvement Indices construction can be provided on request) An additional index (SI – interaction with lecturers) was constructed on the basis of seven questions about different aspect of student-professor interaction (a mean average of seven indicators) (See *Appendix*).

Results

The main hypothesis of our study was that various educational programmes form different civic values and motivation for participating in corresponding practices. Economics and Management educational programmes cultivate the values of professional development, rather than civic engagement or humanistic values, in comparison with Theology, Pedagogy and Humanities Departments.

The average values of the Civic Engagement Index are significantly different among students of different educational programmes (ANOVA, $F = 23.627$, $p < 0.0001$). The highest average value of the Civic Engagement Index was among Theology students (0.54), a little less among the Humanities students (0.47) and students of Pedagogical departments (0.44). The lowest level of the Civic Engagement Index characterized students who specialize in Economics and Management (0.37) (analysis using the Tamhane criterion showed that the value of the Civic Engagement Index for Theology students is significantly different from all other university departments, except for "Other specializations").

Table 1.

Average values of the Civic Engagement Index among students of various educational programmes

	Theology	Economics and Management	Pedagogy and Education	Humanities	Other	Total
Index Average	0.54	0.37	0.44	0.47	0.46	0.43
N	214	834	415	380	62	1905

On the next step, several hypotheses that could explain the difference in the index values were tested via linear regression analysis.

Apart from different values and patterns of civic behaviour, cultivated by different educational programmes, the difference in Civic Engagement Index could be explained by student involvement in the educational process, family background, religiosity and social capital. First, involvement in the educational process can distract students from civic engagement and, on the contrary, can provide time and motivation for it. Second, social capital of students can also affect the value of the Civic Engagement Index. Third, higher Civic Engagement Index values can be attributed to a higher level of religiosity (frequency of church attendance). Educational programmes can play the role of clusters for such people, but not directly generate high or low levels of civic engagement. Finally, the differences in Civic Engagement Index values can be explained by the student's family background (parents' educational level, employment status, income level, etc.) and socio-demographic characteristics.

To identify the factors affecting the Civic Engagement Index, a number of linear regression models have been constructed with the Civic Engagement Index as the dependent variable (all variables were recoded into the 0 to 1 format in order to provide a uniform measurement system for the indicators). A regression model was constructed in several stages. At the first stage, it included only educational programmes as independent (dummy) variables. As compared to the students in Economics, all other educational programmes have a positive effect on the Civic Engagement Index ($R^2 = 0.05$).

At the next stage, a maximum set of variables according to our hypothesis was included in the model as control variables (R^2 increases to 0.27). Since some of the variables proved to be insignificant, at the subsequent stage we excluded them from the model. Among them are such variables as family characteristics of the student, his financial situation and past employment experience, accommodation characteristics, and religious denomination, some of the student involvement indicators. Thus, we come to the final model, in which only significant variables remain ($R^2 = 0.24$). The results show that the most important variables affecting the Civic Engagement Index positively are: students' social capital (general trust level and the size of social support networks) and the level of religiosity (frequency of church attendance). Student involvement has slightly less influence (interaction with the lecturer, participation in seminars, preparation for the seminars, extracurricular / optional activities).

There is a long tradition of scientific discussion on the question of whether religion facilitates altruism and pro-social behaviour (Norenzayan, Shariff 2008), volunteering (Ruiter, De Graaf 2006), benevolence (Saroglou et. al. 2004), etc. We would expect religiosity impact to be the main competing hypothesis with the educational programmes influence, explaining the highest values of the Civic

Engagement Index among Theology students in our study. As soon as we include frequency of church attendance in the regression, the effect of Theology department becomes about equal with other educational programmes (compared to Economics and Management).

Table 2.

Linear regression coefficients for the Civic Engagement Index

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	Beta	B	Beta	B	Beta
(Constant)	0.370***		0.017		0.040	
Theology	0.170***	0.202***	0.068*	0.083*	0.071**	0.086**
Pedagogy and education	0.068***	0.106***	0.120***	0.190***	0.072***	0.112***
Humanities	0.104***	0.156***	0.062**	0.090**	0.081***	0.123***
Other educational programmes	0.087**	0.058**	0.026	0.018	0.061*	0.041*
Gender (1-male, 0-female)			0.060**	0.099**	0.037**	0.061**
Financial situation			0.002	0.002		
Year of education			-0.072	-0.064	-0.066**	-0.059**
SI – interaction with lecturers			0.092	0.072	0.124***	0.097***
SI – participation in seminars			0.090	0.069	0.058*	0.047*
SI – preparation for seminars			0.117**	0.109**	0.082***	0.080***
SI – work on assignments with groupmates			-0.001	-0.001		
SI – extracurricular / optional activities			0.101	0.078	0.106**	0.082**
SI – use Internet to do and discuss assignments / prepare written work			-0.028	-0.021		
Average level of attendance in the first semester			-0.012	-0.007		
Mother (stepmother) has higher education			0.038*	0.072*		
Father (stepfather) has higher education			0.017	0.031		
HEI increases the chances to achieve the desired – Material wellbeing			0.012	0.011		
HEI increases the chances to achieve the desired – Family life			-0.057	-0.045		
HEI increases the chances to achieve the desired – Religious life			-0.062	-0.049		
Marital status – Married			-0.035	-0.034		
Have children			-0.008	-0.003		
Intention to have a child in the next 3 years			0.044	0.052		
Have 2 or more siblings (come from a large family)			0.023	0.029		
Live at a relative's/friend's home			0.065	0.063		
Live in a hostel			-0.004	-0.006		
Rent an apartment			0.019	0.026		
Number of people living in the same room			0.000	0.000		
Have paid work			0.097**	0.109**	0.060**	0.068**
Past employment experience			-0.023	-0.043		
Diversity of social support network			0.509***	0.237***	0.443***	0.207***
Generalized trust			0.048	0.041	0.063**	0.054**
Frequency of church attendance			0.214***	0.236***	0.177***	0.198***
Denomination – Other			0.040	0.040		
Denomination – None/atheist			0.056	0.063		
R^2	0.05		0.27		0.24	



*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$. Reference categories for dummy-variables: For educational programmes – Economics and Management, Residence type while studying – Live in my own home, Denomination – Russian Orthodox Christian. B – unstd. coefficient, beta – std. coefficient.

Conclusion

The results obtained are generally consistent with the results obtained by other researchers (Hill, Dulk 2013). An important result of our study is that even when controlled for all the variables that could provide an alternative explanation for the difference in Civic Engagement Index, educational programmes remain to be a significant factor. Students in Theology, Education Studies and Humanities have higher Civic Engagement Index values than students in Economics and Management. But the hypothesis on socializing effect and value transmission should be revised according to 'out of programme' effects. It does not mean that we should just refuse the idea of educational influence and put religion or social capital as counterparts in a prediction of civic engagement. The question for a discussion is how they could be related to each other in facilitating such a strong influence?

We have shown that even though the educational departments (especially Theology) perform the role of a cluster, recruiting and selecting students with features significant for civic engagement, there still remains an important share of influence that can be attributed to the educational programmes characteristics that promote (or prevent) specific civic culture values and practices in their students.

The post-Soviet transition gave institutions the ability to open and expand new educational programmes. Theology and Economics represent quite different patterns of organized learning on civic engagement, including 'pure teaching effect' and selecting students with different amount of social capital and level of religiosity. David Kamenz argued that "colleges have much of their effect on students because of their linkages to the wider social order" (Kamens 1971: 293). They differ in the structural networks they have with certain occupational and economics groups. We would argue that this hypothesis is highly relevant for the comparative study of educational programmes influencing civic engagement of students. In spite of the pure effect of educational programme our results revealed the significant influence of religion and social capital on students' civic engagement and the less significant influence of student involvement. This means that a programme in Theology, for example, works not only as a socializing or acculturating institution but also as a cluster with a 'charter' (Kamenz 1971) that define and legitimize a distinctive student audience image. We observed that students coming to this or that programme are embedded in wider networks based on social and religious practices fruitful to civic engagement. Theology differs from Economics and Management not only in its pure socializing effect, but in its ability to attract and educate motivated students through such networks of civic solidarity. Organized learning characteristics should be recognized as a source of reflection on how civic society could be socially constructed in contemporary Russia.

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Appendix

Civic Engagement Index

The index includes the following questions:

- Can you recall how many hours during the previous seven-day week you spent on the following activities? - Unpaid work (volunteering, voluntary assistance) (1 - engaged in unpaid work, 0 – not engaged).

- Do you participate in the activities of any of the following organisations - Religious or secular non-profit organisations, sports, environmental, art, music, or educational organisations, churches / monasteries/ mosques/ synagogues/ etc., trade unions, political parties or groups, professional associations, humanitarian or charitable organisations, organisations for the protection of consumer rights, other organisations? (1 - participate in the activities of any organisation, 0 – do not participate).

- Which of the following aspects do you personally think are important in your future job? (a list of 20 items proposed) (1 - "A useful job for society" answer chosen, 0 – not chosen).

- Which of the following do you consider the most important when choosing a job? Salary, prestigious job, not necessarily highly paid, to benefit people. (1 - "to benefit people" answer chosen, 0 – not chosen).

- Have you participated in the following types of volunteering during the past year? If yes, whom did you help? (a list of 10 items proposed) (1 - helped someone, 0 – did not volunteer).

- Have you participated in the following types of volunteering during the past year? If yes, how did you help? (a list of 11 items proposed) (1 – helped, 0 - did not volunteer).

Social capital

The question to measure the composition (heterogeneity) of social support networks is:

- If you were in a crisis (loss of job, family problems, illness, etc.), to whom would you turn for help? (a list of 13 items proposed). The index is a number of items mentioned divided by the maximum possible number of categories (1 – 13 categories chosen, 0 – “no one” answer chosen).

The question to measure generalized trust level (adapted from European Values Study) is:

- Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? (an 11-point scale: 1 – “most people can be trusted”, 0 – “you can't be too careful”).

Student Involvement Indices

Five factors include the following:

- 1) SI – participation in seminars
- 2) SI – preparation for seminars
- 3) SI – work on assignments with groupmates
- 4) SI – extracurricular / optional activities
- 5) SI – use Internet to do and discuss assignments / prepare written work.

An additional Student involvement index (SI – interaction with lecturers) was constructed on the basis of seven questions about different aspect of student-professor interaction (a mean average of seven indicators):

- 1) discussed course assignments and grades individually with professors
- 2) discussed professional, career plans with professors
- 3) discussed issues and ideas related to the course with professors during extracurricular time
- 4) received written comments on assignments from professors

- 5) received oral comments on assignments from professors
- 6) discussed nonacademic issues (employment, research work, personal issues) with professors
- 7) discussed drafts of written work (except for term papers and diploma thesis) with professors.