PUBLIC OPINION RECOGNITION PROBLEM IN PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

S. Chavkina
Zaporizhzhya National Technical University,
64, Zhukovskogo Str., Zaporizhzhya 69000 Ukraine
csvetvl@gmail.com

Abstract: The author of the article analyses an important problem of using public opinion to manage the Ukrainian society on the basis of the research done in large industrial center of the country. According to the results of the expert poll (involving deputies of self-governing authorities and government organizations managers) and public opinion of the city inhabitants the level of public opinion consideration and its expression in the process of social management is considered.

Keywords: public opinion, public management, social management, sociology, Ukraine.

Introduction

For over twenty years Ukrainian society has been developed under democratic transformations conditions. We won’t now exaggerate saying that currently the politicians and managers are unlikely to deny the important role played by one of the most important keystones of the democracy development and functioning i.e. by the public opinion. At the same time there is lack of the information from the sociological research characterizing the specificity of interaction of the governing authorities and public opinion and consideration of the latter.

This complex challenge as well as the analysis of the objective and subjective factors stipulating for the necessity (or its absence) to consider public opinion is not paid much attention in the specialized literature. Actually, only V. Poltorak deals with this matter in the work “Public opinion sociology” issued in 2000. This problem was also considered within 1960-70ies during so-called “Taganrog project” the results of which concerning this matter were not published.

Besides, this problem is of significant value as it is practically impossible to clearly determine and characterize the principal necessity and the degree of obligatory (non-obligatory) public opinion recognition in the course of solution of different social, economic and political issues. V. Ossovskyi reasonably says that even “in the times of so-called perestroika (restoration) the sociologists paid their attention to the fact that one of the most important contradictions of the democratization process and, consequently, of participation of the public opinion subjects in social decision-making is the contradiction between the massive involvement and competence”. The more difficult the matter is the less people are as a rule really keen on it. But the smaller group of the specialists influencing the solution of the matter is the lesser is massive involvement and the more limited the group of participants is. The specialists and their competence shall be trusted by the people. To be short, it is not worth to run to two extremes, the one being pseudo-democracy under which “the collective is always right” and the other being elitism under which the public opinion is completely ignored. Thus, practically the problem “to consider public opinion in any specific case or not” has no clear and unambiguous answer. In this case V. Ossovsky even bases his opinion on the position of famous American scientists, Daniel Yankelovich who deeply studied public opinion and said: “Leader shall not look for dialog with the people if their opinion is unknown. He may ambiguously evaluate the results of the poll: if people are not ready to agree with me than I shall not deal with this disputable matter”. Such approach is mistakable. Here is more clever opinion: “What should I do to prepare people to perception of the problem we are going to face with?” In this case public opinion polls are necessary for the leaders in the democratic society (Ossovskyi, 1999, p72).”

Method

Thus, the problem of objective need in public opinion recognition in the course of public management is ambiguous. In this case much depends on one hand on the kind of occurring problem and possibility to rely on public opinion solving it (awareness on the problem, competence etc.). On the other hand, the public opinion
consideration by some manager, politician or authority in the course of some problem solution is not less important. We consider their ability to determine required level of public opinion consideration in solving corresponding problems to be the factor largely envisaging efficiency and success in their activity.

In our opinion this means the following: if the manager or politician decided that it is vitally important for efficient solution of some problem to recognize public opinion of the population of the country, region or some part of the population, this should be done and moreover the publicity of the consideration process must be provided. If the public opinion even determined in the polling processes contradicts to the objective processes of social, economic or political development of the country, region etc. then politician must provide the population with the explanations aimed at convincing people of impossibility (inexpediency) of making the decisions “offered” by the public opinion.

This is the way the consideration of public opinion should be performed according to the objective factors of dealing with it.

The other case is the specificity of their attitude to the necessity and importance of the public opinion recognition in their activity in the course of decision-making and specific decisions implementation. Unfortunately this problem is solved too clearly and effectively in Ukraine as significant number of the managers and politicians consider this problem of public opinion recognition ambiguously. Let us mention main reasons of this, according to V. Poltorak.

Firstly, this is facilitated by the problem related to the so-called “anti-informational” nature of our society it currently demonstrates in many cases. This means that the employees of the government authorities, politicians and others don’t need any real and reliable information about attitude of the public and citizens to some problems and activity of the governmental authorities.

Secondly, the employees of the authorities often are skeptical about the information expressed in public opinion as they consider it evident. This thought is not to be proved by the experience.

Thirdly, the reason of inadequate attitude to public opinion recognition may be unprofessionalism of the authorities’ employees and, moreover, of significant number of the politicians; misunderstanding of what public opinion is and how it should be used in managerial and political work (Poltorak, 2000).

This problem was also considered by famous Ukrainian sociologist Y. Golovakha who has expressed his opinion about it. In particular, he determined the following features of public opinion perception by the representatives of political establishment of Ukraine:

–literal perception i.e. some politicians and managers consider the polling results as the direct stimuli to act;
–unambiguous interpreting i.e. the obtained results are perceived purely as opposite although public opinion is mostly often ambivalent in the modern society;
–emotional selectivity (often tendentiousness) of perception leading to the good perception of the positive information and negative perception of the negative information revealed in the course of public opinion polling (Leontyeva et al. 2011).

Results

It is possible to verify the presence (or absence) of such problems in the managers’ dealing with the public opinion with the help of the results of the research conducted in Zaporizhzhya at the department of social work of Zaporizhzhya National Technical University in 2012-2013 in the course of which 40 experts (self-governing authorities employees, local administration deputies) and 651 dwellers of the city were polled under representative selection throughout city the districts of the. The results of the research were the following. The following groups consider (indicated ratio) that public opinion is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Public Opinion</th>
<th>Managers</th>
<th>City inhabitants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>recognized completely and practically always</td>
<td>5,0 %</td>
<td>2,3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recognized mostly often but not concerning all problems and groups of citizens</td>
<td>55,0 %</td>
<td>37,5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consider that public opinion practically is not recognized by the governing authorities</td>
<td>37,5 %</td>
<td>51,7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other opinion</td>
<td>2,5 %</td>
<td>8,5 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that from the point of view of the ordinary citizens public opinion of the deputies of all levels (68.7%), managers and volunteers of political parties and public organizations (44.8%), journalists and mass
media employees (41.3%) is mostly recognized. The least considered is the public opinion of the following social strata: teachers, health care organizations employees and culture organizations employees (79.3% of the respondents think that their public opinion is not recognized), workers and employees (78.5%), entrepreneurs (63.6%). In general considering everything mentioned above about the public opinion competence in the view of its recognition this position is justified. At the same time general trends in public opinion recognition by the employees of the authorities cannot be considered justified. In general according to the results of the conducted research it is possible to conclude that currently in Ukraine there are many situations when public opinion of the population is not taken into account or recognized insufficiently by the employees of the authorities because the specificity of their activity is similar being aimed at public opinion consideration. This is proved by the results of the research (See. Table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons of insufficient recognition of the public opinion</th>
<th>% respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employees of the authorities and deputies are weakly informed about public opinion, viewpoints of the different groups of population regarding urban life problems and the ways of their solution</td>
<td>12,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They consider public opinion and information contained in it to be incompetent and random</td>
<td>37,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees of the authorities have principally negative attitude to the public opinion in making managerial decisions because orientation towards public opinion may, to their opinion, leads only to making populist and economically unreasonable decisions</td>
<td>25,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees of the authorities and deputies don’t clearly understand how public opinion may and must be considered in making managerial decisions</td>
<td>25,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other reasons</td>
<td>5,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard to answer</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The results obtained in the course of experts poll show that public opinion is currently insufficiently studied and recognized in managerial activity. According to the positions 2-4 in the Table, 87.5% of the polled experts expressed widely spread but insufficiently correct attitude to public opinion.

The first one is the “information of the public opinion is incompetent and random”. It is really so. But!!! It is necessary to study and recognize it to “define” and understand the opinion of the public and not to act only according the thoughts “imposed from above”. That is the reason for the poll to compare objective situation, opinions to the problems and their solutions by those managing the state or country with the opinions and thoughts existing in the “subjective world”, opinions by the ordinary citizens. That is why if the public opinion is in this case recognized this warranties to the control authorities that the situation under which the decisions cannot be implemented as they don’t recognize the public opinions is absent.

The second position is that “orientation towards public opinion may lead only to making populist decisions”. In fact, if we ask the people if they are ready to rapid increase in prices for the food products than it is possible to suppose that the answers will be unambiguously negative. But, who said that the respondents may be asked any questions? To the contrary, it is clearly made questions expertly verified by the professional sociologists that allow us to obtain the information necessary to the authorities, political parties and the state.

The third position is that “it is unclear how public opinions may be considered in making managerial decisions”. Experts’ support to this position proves that there is still “anti-informational society” in Ukraine It is the society where the decisions are made without any consideration of the public opinions i.e. in other words, real condition of the “object of management”. But currently we talk about social management, i.e. control over people and social groups they are involved in. That is why such “management” cannot be justified under any circumstances. The other case is that the politicians, deputies and managers are not practically taught how to consider public opinion in the democratic society.

Thus, the analysis of the experts poll results shows that deputies, managers working at the government authorities in general understand how important is to study and use public opinion in the sphere of social
management. At the same time real public opinion recognition in the course of urban social sphere management is insufficient. This may be explained with insufficient qualification and awareness of these people of the essence, possibilities and the technologies for public opinion recognition in management process.

**References**