

## **Social activity of student youth in the Rostov region: institutional aspects and subjective perception**

### **Actividad social de los estudiantes jóvenes en la región de Rostov: aspectos institucionales y percepción subjetiva**

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## Summary

The author analyzes the features of social activity of student youth by studying the structural components: motivational, resource availability and subjective perception that are influenced by the specially created institutional conditions. Through a survey of socially active students, it is discovered that the essential idea of this activity characterized by dominating motives of the public good does not correspond to reality which is based primarily on the pragmatic motivation of the subjects of activity. It is established that the created institutional conditions form the resource availability, which is sought after by students and represented by the cultural and social capitals, and the increased expectations of converting the capitals into professional resources at the start of their career. A semi-standard in-depth interview is conducted among working youth who engage in social activity during the university course. The results of the interview indicate that the resource availability formed by the social activity remains unutilized by employers at the start of one's career. Based on the results of the interview, the author notes the contradictions of the efficient conversion of social activity into professional resources.

**Key Words:** social activity, student youth, institutional conditions for social activity, structural components of social activity.

## Resumen

El autor analiza las características de la actividad social de los estudiantes jóvenes mediante el estudio de los componentes estructurales: motivacional, disponibilidad de recursos y percepción subjetiva que son influenciados por las condiciones institucionales especialmente creadas. A través de una encuesta a estudiantes socialmente activos, se descubre que la idea esencial de esta actividad caracterizada por motivos dominantes del bien público no se corresponde con la realidad que se basa principalmente en la motivación pragmática de los sujetos de actividad. Se establece que las condiciones institucionales creadas conforman la disponibilidad de recursos, que es buscada por los estudiantes y representada por los capitales culturales y sociales, y las mayores expectativas de convertir las capitales en recursos profesionales al inicio de su carrera. Se realiza una entrevista en profundidad semi-estándar entre jóvenes trabajadores que participan en actividades sociales durante el curso universitario. Los resultados de la entrevista indican que la disponibilidad de recursos formada por la actividad social sigue sin ser utilizada por los empleadores al comienzo de la carrera. A partir de los resultados de la entrevista, el autor observa las contradicciones de la conversión eficiente de la actividad social en recursos profesionales.

**Palabras clave:** actividad social, juventud estudiantil, condiciones institucionales para la actividad social, componentes estructurales de la actividad social.

## Introducción

Social activity has repeatedly become the subject of sociological research. This phenomenon is of particular interest among student youth as the most receptive, dynamic and progressive social group which is at the stage of professional training to take its place in labor communities in the coming years (Mikhailovskaya, 2014).

The state and society are clearly aware of the importance of developing a young person's personality capable of playing the role of an active citizen of the country (Makarov et al., 2017). Furthermore, a highly competitive environment makes special demands on the competence portfolio of a future specialist, an important role in which is played by over-professional skills and abilities that are formed when one is socially active (Yakovlev, 2015). Thus, the creation of favorable conditions for the inclusion of student youth in the practice of social activity is designated as a priority task for the sphere of youth policy and education and is characterized by the presence of certain institutional conditions. At the same time, these conditions directly impact the emerging social activity, its structural components. On the one hand, such activity contributes

to the organization of youth at the university, the beneficial use of their energy and resources, forming the trans-professional student competencies (Plugar, 2015). On the other hand, the problem of evidence and real demand for highly developed social activity is actualized at the stage of completing the educational program in higher education and finding a job. Thus, the issues related to the features of social activity of university students as well as the institutional conditions that determine the development vector of this activity require detailed study.

The purpose of the article is to analyze the features of the social activity of student youth (using the example of the Rostov region, Russia) by studying the features of the structural components of this activity which are formed in the created institutional conditions, as well as identify the level of expectations and real prospects for converting social activity in the post-university period into professional resources.

According to the hypothesis put forward, the social activity of student youth in the Rostov region is largely determined by the institutional conditions within which the social activity is formed and developed. The essential idea of this activity is determined by "we-orientation" with the dominance of motivation for the activity for the benefit of society, however, student implementation is based on "me-orientation" with the prevalence of pragmatic motives. Moreover, the institutional conditions of social activity form the cultural and social capitals sought after by students, as well as increased expectations for the conversion of capital into professional resources in the post-university period that cannot be fully realized. The social activity of university graduates remains unutilized by employers at the start of their careers.

### **Literature review**

The problems of the formation and development of social activity in student youth are of particular interest to sociologists regardless of the historical period and location. However, the conducted literature review allows one to talk about the existing differences in the vectors of interest of Russian and foreign researchers.

Modern foreign scholars focus on the analysis of young people's political and civic forms of social activity. Most works are based on the contradictions of the expectations of government institutions and the younger generation through the analysis of the protest position (Banaji, 2008; Vakaoti, 2017; Ilišin, Gvozdanović, Potočnik, 2018). Socio-political activity is analyzed depending on the political regime of the country in which young people live (Bee, 2021) as well as educational and social factors (Henn, Foard, 2014). Another category includes studies of the involvement of young migrants living in European countries in political processes through the understanding of national identity and political interaction in the era of global development and high level of mobility (Rubio et al., 2019; Riniolo, Ortensi, 2021). Furthermore, Western sociologists pay significant attention to environmental activism, which has been prominent among young people over the past few years (Bowman, 2020). Environmental activism is seen as a form of political activity that demonstrates the "active skepticism" of young people (Pickard, 2019), an evolving "do-it-yourself" approach (Wring, Henn, Weinstein, 1999) and other types of political behavior construction.

Russian sociologists define broader boundaries in the consideration of social activity. This activity is investigated through involvement in the transformation of the surrounding world (Tyutyundzhi, 2012), the development of a young person's social and cultural capital (Balog, 2018; Krotov, 2009), civic participation (Omelchenko, 2004), features of deviant forms of manifestation (Sorokin, 2019; Zubok, Chuprov, 2011) and the impact on the lifestyle of student youth (Sapronov, 2009). The focus of sociologists is also aimed at the formation of civic identity through social participation (Voitenko, Serikov, 2016), political activity (Dyatlov, Kovalev, Ponamarev, 2020), student and youth self-government (Magranov, Mosienko, Detochenko, 2018) and state regulation of social activity (Podyachev, Khaliy, 2020). Of particular importance for Russian sociological thought are studies related to the investigation of the theoretical foundations of social activity: structures (Konstantinov, 1990), characteristics, forms, (Gaifullin, Rybalko, 2011; Sharapov, 2011) motivation and value orientations of activity (Malkovskaya, 2013).

Thus, the literature analysis reveals certain discrepancies in the focus of attention of Russian and foreign researchers who study the social activity of youth. The former focus on the study of this phenomenon through participation in mostly political practice. Russian sociologists examine an expanded problem field that includes various types and forms of activity.

Despite the multifaceted research, there is a lack of works on understanding the relationship between the institutional conditions for the development of the social activity of student youth, purposefully created for her, the activity undertaken and the expectation of its conversion into professional resources used in employment and in professional activity.

## Methods

A systematic analysis of the social activity of student youth is carried out through the study of the structural components of this activity, including subjective perception, motivational component and resource availability, as well as the study of the institutional conditions within which social activity is implemented.

The study is based on the following sociological concepts: student youth is viewed through the methodological guidelines identified in V.I. Chuprov's theory of social reproduction (Chuprov, 1999) and the concept of the sociocultural mechanism of self-regulation of young people by J.A. Zubok (2020) when defining the social activity of student youth as a phenomenon, the focus is on the A.I. Balog's understanding (2017). The study of the structural components of social activity is based on the structuralist-constructivist paradigm by P. Bourdieu (resource availability component) (1983), the motivational mechanism formulated by G.E. Zborovskii (motivational component) (2004) and the theoretical foundations of social activity proposed by V.G. Mordkovich (a component of subjective perception) (1986). The basis for solving research problems related to the institutional measurement of the social activity of student youth in the Rostov region is the D. North theory of institutional changes (1991).

Social activity of student youth is understood as activities aimed at the development and actualization of the resource availability of the individual through their participation in extra-curricular and extra-labor social practices focused on changing the surrounding world, during the period of receiving professional education.

Institutional conditions within the framework of the stated study are interpreted as a system of norms, rules and vectors formed by social institutions in relation to the student community and implemented in regulatory documents, a system of youth programs and projects.

An empirical study was carried out within the geographical boundaries of the Rostov region of the Russian Federation. The main methods are:

Analysis of normative legal acts regulating the implementation of state youth policy at the federal and regional levels.

Analysis of the results of a survey conducted among student activists of universities in the Rostov region in Dec. 2019 – Feb. 2020. (Southern Federal University as a federal university located in the region; Don State Technical University as a backbone university of the Rostov region; South-Russian Institute of Management – a branch of Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration as a regional branch of the university of the federal center; Platov South-Russian State Polytechnic University (NPI) as a university located outside the regional center; Taganrog institute named after A.P. Chekhov as a branch of the regional university).

The sample is nested, based on data on the structural units of youth policy located in the universities of the Rostov region, in which students who are socially active are involved.

The selection of respondents was carried out by the method of a nested two-stage sampling. Structural elements that develop the social activity of students (student council, trade union organization, student club, associations, public organization operating on the basis of universities, etc.) are designated as nests. A sample was designed from the list of participants in the structural elements. Within the nests themselves, the selection of respondents was carried out according to the following criteria: full-time education in educational programs (bachelor's, specialist's, master's) and documented social activity (participation in the work of student government bodies and representative bodies of students, the work of clubs and sections, student and youth associations conducting their work within educational institutions of higher education and beyond). The general population was 58,436 students. The sample size was 857 students, which is enough to obtain representative data, given the homogeneity and small variation range. For this sample, the maximum error size with a probability of 97% does not exceed 4%

The empirical data set was processed in the SPSS Statistics 26 software. Descriptive statistics tools were used: frequency analysis and contingency tables.

Analysis of the results of in-depth semi-standardized interviews conducted in Jan. – Mar. 2020 among postgraduate youth who were socially active during their studies at universities located in the Rostov region indicates the following. The results of the social activity of the research participants are confirmed by the presence of diplomas, certificates, letters of appreciation, etc. The respondents have mastered educational programs in the following areas: humanities, engineering (technical), natural science, pedagogical, architecture and art. The age of the respondents is up to 30 years, which made it possible to ensure the similarity of the institutional conditions within which the social activity of post-university youth and today's students developed. At this stage, the informants have completed their bachelor's or master's degree programs, four out of 30 respondents continue their postgraduate studies, combining them with professional activities. For the study, the academic performance of the respondents during the period of study as well as employment in the specialty obtained as part of the educational program in higher education is not significant. The work experience of the informants is at least three years. A total of 30 interviews were conducted.

## **Results**

To understand the created institutional conditions, we analyzed the legal foundations of social activity among student youth. Regional conditions are built in accordance with the federal agenda, where the most relevant areas are volunteering, patriotic education, career guidance activities, youth self-government, support for talented youth, creation of a common communication space and implementation of youth initiatives (Fundamentals of the State Youth Policy of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2025 approved by the Government Decree N 2403-p, 2014). These directions are implemented through youth programs and projects that offer personal and team forms of participation.

The results of a survey of socially active university students indicate a high level of satisfaction with the institutional conditions created by the university and youth policy bodies. The relationship was revealed between the assessment of the quality of personal activity and the level of satisfaction with various aspects of the created conditions: the variety of activities carried out outside the educational organization (Table 1), the possibilities of self-fulfillment within the university (Table 2) and the correspondence of ideas about the importance and significance of the projects being implemented (Table 3). The higher the students rate their own social activity, the higher the level of their personal satisfaction with the existing institutional conditions. The relationship was also determined between the frequency of participation and the level of satisfaction with the implementation of activities within the framework of the students' request (Table 4), the frequency of participation and the level of satisfaction with the availability of events held in the Rostov region (Table 5). The highest level of satisfaction is shown by students involved in social activity on an ongoing basis. The analysis of social activity according to the activity

criterion demonstrates the greatest demand for social activity. The research type of social activity is least in-demand among students of higher educational institutions of the Rostov region (Table 6).

**Table 1**

*The level of satisfaction of students in the Rostov region with the variety of events held outside universities depending on the personal evaluation of the participation quality, %*

Students' evaluation of the quality of personal social activity, where 1 is terrible and 5 is excellent	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Completely satisfied	28.2	46.7	43.0	53.5	54.2	48.8
Mostly satisfied	42.4	38.7	43.0	35.4	32.9	37.9
Mostly dissatisfied	18.2	9.3	10.1	7.6	9.7	9.4
Dissatisfied	15.2	1.3	3.9	3.5	3.2	3.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Table 2**

*The level of satisfaction with self-fulfillment opportunities depending on the evaluation of the personal participation activity, %*

Level of satisfaction with self-fulfillment opportunities	Students' evaluation of the quality of personal social activity from 1 to 5, where 1 is terrible and 5 is excellent				
	1	2	3	4	5
Completely satisfied	28.6	32.6	39.2	46.7	42.3
Mostly satisfied	45.7	48.8	38.5	37.7	31.9
Mostly dissatisfied	17.1	11.6	16.5	12.7	15.3
Dissatisfied	8.6	7.0	5.9	3.0	10.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Table 3**

*The level of correspondence to the students' ideas about the necessity and importance of events held in the Rostov region depending on the evaluation of the quality of personal activity, %*

Evaluate the quality of your own social activity from 1 to 5, where 1 is terrible and 5 is excellent	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Completely satisfied	12.5	34.3	37.7	42.0	38.2	38.0
Mostly satisfied	34.4	47.1	41.2	36.3	40.8	39.6
Mostly dissatisfied	37.5	14.3	15.2	16.4	10.5	15.5
Dissatisfied	15.6	4.3	5.8	5.3	10.5	6.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Table 4**

*The level of satisfaction of university students in the Rostov region with the correspondence of university events to student demands, %*

	Every month	Once in a few months	Once in six months or less often	Total
Completely satisfied	48.6	38.4	35.2	41.9
Mostly satisfied	34.3	37.1	41.2	36.9
Mostly dissatisfied	11.5	17.5	16.1	14.7
Dissatisfied	5.6	7.0	7.5	6.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Table 5**

*The level of satisfaction of students in the Rostov region with the availability and accessibility of events held outside the universities depending on the frequency of participation, %*

Frequency of social activity	Every month	Once in a few months	Once in six months or less often	Total
Completely satisfied	50.9	46.4	44.2	47.8
Mostly satisfied	39.3	38.5	36.5	38.4
Mostly dissatisfied	7.4	13.1	11.6	10.4
Dissatisfied	2.4	2.1	7.7	3.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Table 6**

*The distribution of answers to the question "What types of activity besides educational do you engage in?", %*

Sports (member of sports clubs, take part in races, competitions, etc.)	14.6
Art (dance, singing, theatre and art studios, creative clubs)	28.3
Social activity (various youth groups and organizations)	44.8
Research (participation in grant programs, attendance of research clubs, development of the research topic)	7.7
Other	4.6

When studying subjective perception, a structural component of social activity, the respondents identified the image of a social activist in the student environment (Table 7). Most respondents define such a young person as willing to solve some problematic issue for the benefit of others (42.7%). Their work is based on the motive to act for the benefit of society. The desire to participate in events for self-development is inherent in a student activist according to 36.2% of respondents. The choice of this answer demonstrates the presence of the subject's self-orientation based on social activity with the dominance of the motive of personal benefit. At the same time, it is significant that most students who are socially active do not identify this activity with the defense of civil rights; this position is indicated by 12.1% of respondents.

**Table 7**

*The distribution of the answers to the question "What student could be called socially active?", %*

A student who sees a social problem and tries to solve the problem	42.7
A student who strives to participate everywhere for self-development	36.2
A student who is ready to defend their social and civil rights	12.1
A student who has many friends and acquaintances is always in the spotlight	8.6

The data are also confirmed in the answer to another question "Which of the presented definitions most characterizes the social activity of student youth?" (Table 8). Students also

disagree when describing the perception of a given activity. While 39.0% of respondents perceive social activity through an orientation towards the public good, 48.8% see it through the subject's orientation towards themselves when being active (self-development, meeting interesting and useful people).

**Table 8**

*The distribution of the answers to the question "Which of the presented definitions most characterizes the social activity of student youth?", %*

Activities aimed at developing society through good deeds, helping those in need, implementing important initiatives	39.0
Self-development activities	29.5
Activities that allow one to meet interesting and useful people	16.3
Activities involving students who have a lot of spare time	4.2
Activities for students who want to receive perks from the university	10.2

The results allow one to speak of an ambiguous description of the image of a social activist among university youth. On the one hand, students draw parallels with the benefit for society, helping those in need. This type of social activity is designated as solidarity-based, represented by "we-orientation". On the other hand, activity is viewed by students as an opportunity for the development of personal resources, that is, activity is defined as an individualistic type of social activity characterized by "me-orientation".

The motivational component of social activity is one of the structural components that also requires analysis. To the question "Why do you participate in extracurricular activities?" (Table 9) only 1.3% of respondents say that they do it without personal desire, appointed by the university. This allows one to characterize the social activity of students in the Rostov region as voluntary. Among the respondents, 27.3% note their desire to acquire trans-professional competencies, gain additional knowledge that will be useful in professional activities. That is, the social activity of young people is aimed at the formation of cultural capital. Moreover, students engage in this activity to be included in various social networks and create a circle of useful acquaintances; 23.7% of the respondents are socially active to form social capital. The choice of these options is characterized by the dominance of pragmatic motives. The prevalence of this category of motives is most pronounced among young people engaged in social activities (50.9% are active to develop skills and abilities, 48.1% to make acquaintances). For a variety in leisure and pleasure, 19.0% of students engage in social activity. The motive of receiving pleasure is the most typical for students involved in creative practices (36.6%). Thus, "social activists" to a large extent show social activity to build up cultural and social capital. Their activity is focused on future professional activity and is based on pragmatic motives. Creative youth are motivated by the enjoyment and the opportunity to diversify their leisure time. Then, 10.6% of social activists work to help those in need. This activity is based on the need for social development. The formation of economic capital expressed in scholarships and other payments is noted by only 4.9% of socially active students.

**Table 9**

*The distribution of the answers to the question "Which of the definitions characterizes the social activity of student youth most fully?" in relation to the type of activity, %*

Which types of activity besides educational do you engage in?	Want to do good to those in need	Strive to develop skills that will be needed in professional activity	Want to diversify my leisure	It is a good opportunity to make interesting and useful acquaintances	A chance to get different grants
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Sports (member of sports clubs, take part in races, competitions, etc.)	15.7	11.5	14.7	15.8	15.7
Art (dance, singing, theatre and art studios, creative clubs)	13.7	19.3	36.6	24.6	12.9
Social activity (various youth groups and organizations)	60.1	50.9	33.7	48.1	48.6
Research (participation in grant programs, attendance of research clubs, development of the research topic)	4.6	9.7	3.7	3.8	15.7
None	2.0	2.8	8.1	3.8	5.7
Other	3.9	5.9	3.3	3.8	1.4

The idea of the demand for social activity, implemented within the framework of the created institutional conditions, is characterized by a high level of expectation of the conversion of this activity into professional resources in the post-university period (Table 10). The majority of students (42.6%) believe that social activity during the period of study at the university will allow them to acquire additional skills, abilities and competencies that will be in-demand by employers when applying for a job. At the same time, the more often a student participates, the more they are sure that social activity will have an impact on employment due to the formed trans-professional competencies (58.1% of those participating every month, 35.8% – once every few months and 25.1% – once in every six months or less often). Social capital, expressed in involvement in communities and acquaintance with a wide range of people during social activity, is noted by 15.4% of informants who believe that this fact will be their competitive advantage in employment. Thus, 58% of students believe that their social activity has the chance to be converted into professional resources in future professional activities.

**Table 10**

*The distribution of the answers to the question "Will your activity during the student years help you get the desired job?" depending on the frequency of participation, %*

Will your activity during the student years help you get the desired job?	How often do you participate in youth projects and events?			Total
	Every month	Once in a few months	Once in six months or less often	
Yes, because due to my activity I can do more than my peers	58.1	35.8	25.1	42.6
Yes, since now I have acquaintances who can help me find a job	12.9	16.6	18.1	15.4
No, I think social activity is not in demand among employers	6.5	10.3	7.0	7.9

No, I think that social activity allows one to have great student years and nothing more.	11.8	14.9	22.1	15.3
Undecided	9.8	22.5	24.6	17.7
Other	0.8	0.0	3.0	1.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

It is also significant that almost a quarter of the students surveyed (24.4%) consider engaging in social activity as a future job due to the contiguity of the profession the students are receiving. Another 23.6% of respondents note that although the initial professional choice is associated with another direction, the students are considering changing the professional trajectory, noting the readiness to engage in social activity as a job. At the same time, a relationship was revealed between the frequency of participation and the willingness to change the professional trajectory. Thus, among those who participate in social practices every month, 29.8% are ready to give up the profession they are mastering in favor of social activity, 23.5% among students who participate once every few months and 12.6% of those who participate once every six months or less often.

However, the results of a series of in-depth interviews with postgraduate youth who were socially active during higher education indicate that the prospects for converting social activity are ambiguous. Despite the acquired trans-professional competencies and the formed circle of acquaintances, social activity is not in-demand among employers. Thus, the idea can be traced in the answer of the informant, "Social activity is not a determining factor or a guarantor for future employment. Unfortunately, the system of social elevators, in a sense, is ostentatious, declarative, rather than systematically working. In many ways, statements by representatives of government institutions about the success of the current policy of supporting the social activity of young people are steadily in the space of rhetoric, not practice (*Alexander, a 2013 graduate of the Political Studies program*). The idea is reiterated in the answer, "I can say with confidence that social activity will not have any impact on the employer unless the work is related to education, culture, mass sports or youth politics. In addition, the activist is convinced that the activist can do more than their acquaintances at the university, therefore requires special, more advantageous offers" (*Alexander, a 2015 graduate of the Ecology and Environmental Management program*). The following opinion is also revealing, "Student activists have different priorities during their studies – they "serve" the university more on different fronts. <...> By graduation, there is a fracture in consciousness as there are significant gaps in educational and academic activities, important components in the development of a specialist are missing. As a result, such students have problems with employment" (*Anton, a 2015 graduate of the Information Systems and Technologies program*).

A different opinion is held by those who did not start working in their specialty, but changed their professional trajectory, having made the transition to social, cultural, creative or sports activities (eight interviews out of 30): "From personal experience, I can say that social activity affects employment positively. Having proven myself in my student years, I received an offer to work at the university in a specialized structure engaged in educational work. Thus, my student activity was transformed into a professional one" (*Maria, a 2016 graduate of the Regional Studies program*).

The data make it possible to note the contradictions in the efficient conversion of social activity into professional resources at the start of one's career, the main ones of which are:

- insufficient mastery of professional competencies due to a shift in focus towards acquiring trans-professional skills and abilities;

- socially active students' excessive requirements for the conditions of professional activity due to defining oneself as a specialist with additional competitive advantages;
- the dysfunctionality of the system expressed in the absence of support for socially active students at the final years, which would allow for a more efficient conversion of social activity into professional resources at the start of one's career.

## Conclusion

The social activity of student youth in the Rostov region is defined as voluntary with a dominant social type. The students' subjective idea of this activity is characterized by the predominant social practices aimed at the formation of a public good with the prevalence of altruistic values. However, when university students do engage in social activity, the students are guided by pragmatic motives focused on personal benefit. The desire to form cultural and social capital dominates, the economic one is less significant. The social activity of individualistic students is characterized by the predominance of pragmatic and hedonistic motives.

Students participating in social practices within the created institutional conditions have a high level of expectation for the conversion of social activity into professional resources in the postgraduate period. Moreover, the more often students participate in social practices, the higher the level of their expectations. Furthermore, more than half of the students of the Rostov region universities involved in the implementation of youth projects are ready to engage in social activity professionally, and a quarter is considering the possibility of changing the professional trajectory, giving priority to this direction. At the same time, representatives of post-university youth in the region indicate that there is no wide demand for social activity on the part of employers. The following main contradictions were identified: insufficient level of mastering professional competencies; socially active students' excessive requirements for the conditions of professional activity, as well as a systemic contradiction that does not allow university graduates to effectively convert social activity into professional resources in the process of employment.

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**Authors' contribution:** The authors have participated in the research process, in the writing of the work and in the analysis of the documents.

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