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**LIBERAL ETHICS AND RHETORIC OF RUSSIAN REGIONAL
POLITICAL ELITE: NEO-INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH**

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Abstract

Late 2018 and 2019 was the period characterized by a number of unflattering, scandalous or even boorish statements of Russia's regional ruling elites. "The state owes you nothing at all" and "pasta-like products always cost the same" have recently become common rhetoric expressions among political beau monde. The article examines the reasons for regional political elite being so arrogant with public. Empirical material includes 84 cases of the loutish behavior of regional Russian elite towards population, as well as the data of an expert survey (N=16). Speech impertinence and cynicism are associated with the desire to enhance public policy effectiveness and with neoliberal influence. The analysis of media publications related to boorishness expressed in public and the results of the expert survey highlighted such key values of the regional political elite as status, well-being, loyalty to higher authorities, stability and efficiency. Thus, the reasons for the irreverent statements should be attributed to systemic staff crisis of ruling authorities, and the lack of competence of the officials who fail to realize Russian politics becomes publicized through digital media nowadays and who are unable to reflect on ideological attitudes (primarily neoliberal) transmitted in such situations. The main consequences of the social arrogance by representatives of the Russian regional political elite could be the civil society activation in response to this trend.

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1. Introduction

In October 2018, the Minister of Employment, Labor and Migration for the Saratov region said that monthly nutrition cost could be limited with the amount of 3,500 rbl, and emphasized that "pasta-like products always cost the same". Soon, her colleagues from other regions were mentioned by federal news broadcasters.

On November 4, 2018, at a meeting with volunteers in Kirovgrad, the Director of the Department of Youth Affairs for Sverdlovsk region noted "The state essentially owes you nothing. Your parents do! Because they gave birth to you. The state did not ask them to bear you".

On January 17, 2019, at the meeting of the Committee on Housing and Utilities Services, a member of Chita City Duma suggested that low-income people living in poorly maintained Chita houses should be cut off electricity at night. On March 10, at a session of the State Council, the head of administration of the Chuvash Republic stated: "In reality there are teachers who do not get much money. But they do not work hard enough, and we must be honest about that today". And these are just some examples of scandalous statements that have recently become part of the usual rhetoric of the political beau monde.

At the end of January 2020, the governor of Chuvashia handed the fire car keys to one employee of the Ministry of Emergency Situations in a peculiar humiliating manner. In November 2020, the Mayor of Aghidel in Bashkiria (on his VKontakte page) resented the reluctance of residents to work for 15,000 rubles a month. He noted that citizens did not want to work as seamstresses, shop assistants, cooks and nurses. In February 2021, a deputy of Penza City Duma released a series of posts on his personal Instagram page in which he criticized the poor for having no flexy mind.

The fact the Russian press reports about such scandals as well as a lively discussion of them on the Internet, on the one hand, transforms customary moderate and proper public image of regional political power elite and, on the other hand, results in deeper criticism of the authorities and civil self-awareness activation.

2. Problem Statement

It is a fundamental academic challenge to analyse new trends in the ruling elite ethos, which, if to draw lessons from a series of media scandals (involving social arrogance signs), is being transformed as to confront the people openly. Among Western researchers, an ethical perspective to study political-administrative elites is also very popular (van der Wal, 2014).

When both social tension and public control of authorities through digital technologies grow state elite actions' irrationality makes it necessary to reflect on the causes and consequences of scandalous statements. The rational behaviour of government representatives in total public policy digitalization circumstances implies caution and awareness of reputational costs of scandalous remarks discussed online.

3. Research Questions

New practices and values arising when the ruling elite interacts with the rest of society in communication digitalization epoch makes it relevant to analyze the causes and consequences of open rudeness and cynicism of the political elite that undermine the social consensus fundamentals established in the 2000s.

The study of power practices reveals the peculiarities of communicative and ethical transformation of the regional political elites' corporate culture. The publicity of social Darwinism and open neglect of low-ranking citizens could be interpreted as a problem of social stability and harmony.

Our hypothesis is that political communication culture changes, as regional elites acquire increasingly cynical attitude to the people, which may be due to changing socio-economic conditions in times of economic and ruling staff crisis, and transforming institutional relations between the federal center and regional officials.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research is to find the the reasons for discourtesy and social arrogance of regional political elites. Our analytical assumption is that elitist scandalous utterances are to be defined as an unconscious (and irrational) attempt to revise the culture of power-society interaction (Glückler & Lenz, 2016). Regional politicians are more inclined to criticizing dependency demands of the population in a very disrespectful manner.

The unflattering speeches of the ruling elite probably have their roots in the changes in the structural-functional relations between federal and regional authorities in unfavourable socio-economic development conditions within Russia. The uncontrollable boorishness of regional authorities can be interpreted as a consequence of double-sided pressure coming from the federal centre and the local population.

5. Research Methods

Rudeness in the communication between authorities and public is suggested to be interpreted within neo-institutional approach (North, 1990) as a set of communicative practices through which regional authorities being political elite exercise interaction with society. In this case, the institution of boorishness is seen as a set of informal conditions, practices, and statements, which are currently in the stage of formation and approval as a political pattern.

The attitude of the regional elite to significant social problems of Russian society can be defined as neoliberal. Qualitative characteristics of the Russian regional political elite are considered here through the prism of Kordonsky's (2018) theory that emphasizes the new class distinction, clannishness and nomenclature.

The media aspect of rudeness is considered from the position of the theory of communicative action by J. Habermas. The qualitative aspect of the applied rhetoric, its perception by Russian society is interpreted by the definition of the communicative competence of the actors.

The material for analysis of reasons for resonant statements and actions of representatives of the regional political elite in the information space includes 84 cases of rudeness and discourtesy towards socially vulnerable sections of community: the unemployed, youth, pensioners, patients, state employees, as well as people belonging to particular professions (journalists, police officers, emergency services workers), and women/men in general. The empirical material also includes expert interviews with regional political elites and political scientists (N=16) conducted in early 2021.

In elitology, there are several approaches to defining corporate ethical (and more broadly speaking, philosophical) features of the ruling class. The most popular among Russian researchers is the analysis of various ideological values of power elite (Shestopal, 2016), as well as the social attitudes of individuals (Rimsky, 2014) and the direct relationship of the ruling class to the ruled population (Popova, 2014). Russian specificity study of power ethics is reduced to the analysis of philosophical aspects of political actors' moral attitudes. Western researchers often consider morality traditionally, finding religious roots of political positions (Ritter, 2021).

The originality and novelty of this research is in the combination of the approaches to understand how liberal outlook dominating Russian elite consciousness resonates with corporate rules accepted for government employees.

6. Findings

The interviews with experts, government officials, political consultants, journalists and academic political scientists make it possible to outline the value field of the regional political elite as follows. Most often, the interviewees pointed to a power status, gaining and keeping it as the key value of the regional elite. This basic value produces a desire for stability (in that person's position and in the development of the region/country), well-being (including material welfare) both for themselves and their environment (including their family).

The expert interviews consider loyalty to the higher authorities in general, as well as effectiveness and efficiency in performing tasks in order to maintain and strengthen the position of some official, as regional elite instrumental values, which is necessary to get the result planned.

The analysis of scandalous allegations and actions of regional elite representatives over the last two and a half years shows the prevalence of a rational and neoliberal approach used to solve social problems. Foreign studies also consider public behavior and rhetoric of politicians within rationalist models (Lovell, 2014; Stokes, 2014). Thus, unpleasant social attitudes such as caste system, belonging to some special status group; ignoring social significance, purpose and consequences of one's official activity are perpetuated, which partially explains the perception of socially unsuccessful people as marginal, and guilty of their own misfortunes. This explains some disrespectful remarks addressing individuals or particular social groups. This conclusion is consistent with the claims of Russian and foreign researchers who point to the class reproduction system of the political elite, which determines the key values and behavior of politicians (Fishman, 2019; Himelboim et al., 2013; Solovyov, 2015). Following the position of ethical revisionism, consciously or not, the Russian public observed a massive surge in these cases in the period 2018-2020, which eventually gave rise to a funnel of rudeness, when each subsequent speaker with the same intention perceived such rhetoric as the norm.

Reflecting in the institutional approach paradigm, let us note some specific features of the functioning and interaction of different government structures in contemporary Russia, which are possibly factors leading to scandalous rhetoric of regional power:

- regional politicians/officials are unable to distance themselves from the population, being directly linked to specific situations and problems "on the spot";
- regional officials/policymakers do not think about the consequences of cynical or irrelevant remarks when discussing social policy;
- the regional elite demonstrate a lack of skills in dealing with socio-economic grievances of the population in the time of socio-economic crisis.

Thus, such unpleasant social attitudes as caste, a sense of belonging to a special status group, indifference to the social meaning, purpose and consequences of one's work activities are consolidated, which in turn explains the perception of socially unsuccessful people as marginalized people who are to blame for their own troubles.

Consequently, scandalous rhetoric is an emotional response of the regional elite to the challenges arising when the state itself is unable to fulfil social obligations under unfavorable economic conditions, and double pressure of both society and the federal center arises. The overwhelming part of the scandals was related to attempts of regional authorities to suppress the social claims of citizens. Liberal essence of regional elite rhetoric resulted in social resolution functions of the state being significantly reduced. At the same time, it is difficult to approve that the officials are affiliating themselves with liberal ideology, but it gives the impression that discourteous statements are transformed into unconscious testing by modern regional elites a new form of explanation to the paternalist-minded masses the neoliberal social policy foundations.

7. Conclusion

Informational "impertinence", occurring from time to time, could reach a critical level, and turn from incidental phenomenon into a new trend in relations of authorities and people, thereby changing the political culture of state-society communication. On the one hand, an active discussion of social rudeness can become a factor in rallying the regional elite based on the transformation of impolite and cynical rhetoric into the norm and rational tools for working with the population's complaints. On the other hand, the discussion of social rudeness has the potential to awaken the civic consciousness of the Russian society. The value and ethical components of the political dialogue between the authorities and the public are the focus of attention and foreign researchers (Bartels, 2015; Stewart & Spencer, 2017).

The scandalous rhetoric of the regional political elite penetrating federal level makes scientific research of local political elite, the ways of it getting power, its economic position, authority, moral qualities, etc. actual.

The lack of consistency of values and guidelines, unprofessionalism, internal conflict and closeness of the regional political elite pose a threat to sustainable development of Russia. The analysed cases have demonstrated the importance of regional elites, whose statements and actions are able to go out at the federal level of the political agenda.

The change in the political communication culture between regional authorities and society stems from changing socio-economic conditions (because of economic and governing crisis) and the transformation of institutional relations between the federal center and regional officials, and it is the cause for the disgruntled people to activate their public civil position.

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