

THE COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS AND BEHAVIOUR OF THE MACROREGION'S POPULATION

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Attitude to Power as a Parasocial Attitude (The Experience of Qualitative Sociological Research in the Siberian Regions)

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Abstract. This article presents the analysis of secondary data obtained under a number of research programmes in the Siberian Federal District. The research focuses on the attitude of residents of the Siberian Federal District to federal, regional, and local authorities. The purpose of this article is to analyse the attitude of the residents of the Siberian Federal District to the power through parasocial relationships. The main results are formulated as follows: there is a gap in the perception of the federal government and regional / municipal authorities. This gap lies in the differences in federal and local authorities' assessment. The concept of parasocial relationships is relatively new for Russian social science. In Western sociology, parasocial relationships are understood as relationships that are devoid of mutual interaction. This paper analyses the factual material of focus groups, examines the main features of parasocial relationships and draws parallels between the attitude to power and the attitude to the main characters of various media products. The article explains political behavior of the residents of the Siberian Federal District using the focus group method. The paper considers two categories of opinions and assessments that were found in the course of the sociological research. These categories are: a) opinions and assessments of power based on the respondents' experience and b) opinions and assessments of power based on media production. This type of research employs quantitative methods of sociological research, including the PSR scale, designed to analyse parasocial relationships.

Keywords: focus groups, parasocial relationships, power, regions of the Siberian Federal District.

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INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the analysis of regional residents' attitude to the power within the framework of a number of studies conducted by the author himself and together with his colleagues in various regions of Russia.

We used a series of regional studies mainly on political issues as a source of data. The research was carried out in 2007 — 2018 in the Siberian Federal District. These studies were conducted for various purposes: from the identification of a regional “agenda” to the analysis of local political processes during electoral campaigns.

This paper focuses not on the main results of the studies, but on the characteristic trend that we found in all the series of qualitative studies.

Within each study, we conducted focus groups in order to obtain data on the qualitative aspect of respondents' opinions. The goal of the focus groups was to formulate hypotheses, which were then tested in the framework of quantitative research. At the same time, the guide of the focus groups included a block of surveys devoted to determining the attitude towards local and federal authorities.

This block was repeated without changes in group guides in different series of studies. This allowed us to compare respondents' answers in dynamics and, more importantly, to talk about a certain trend that manifests itself in the respondents' answers in the most diverse groups.

The problem that we discovered can be formulated as follows: there is a gap in the perception of the federal government and regional / municipal authorities. The attitude to the head of the federal government tends to be positive, with a high degree of support. The attitude to representatives of regional or municipal authorities cannot be characterized by such a positive trend. Moreover, the situations in which the respondents characterise local authorities extremely negatively or find it difficult to express opinions and assessments are quite frequent. This gap generates several hypotheses, which are analysed in this work.

METHODOLOGY

The key methods used in this article are the method of focus groups and the analysis of secondary data.

The focus group method was employed for a number of reasons. First, it was important to get as close as possible to the re-creation of that primary social environment within which attitudes forming the basis for the respondents' political behavior were shaped. Secondly, the focus group method allowed us to obtain indirect data that clarify and extend possible interpretations of the respondents' views and beliefs and allowed a much more correct prognosis of their behavior.

The employment of qualitative sociological methods (in-depth interviews and focus groups) in analysing respondents' political behavior has been considered by a number of authors [1, 2, 7, 8, 13], who indicate the possibility of using focus groups both in sociology and in related sciences. One of the general objections to the employment of these methods is that in focus groups a moderator interferes in

the process, often distorting the essence of the study [5]. Liam Stanley [12] also writes that focus groups have very limited application to the study of political narratives in different communities. This point of view deserves attention, but in this paper we do not aim to analyse the narrative in its classical form. Here we examine a number of circumstances and factors that affect respondents' political behavior.

The studies have been carried out for 11 years (between 2007 and 2018) in the framework of various research programs. The results described in this article were obtained during the development of one block of the guide, which remained unchanged within all research procedures. In relation to the objectives of each of the studies, these results are secondary and optional. Nevertheless, some generalized tendencies found during the research sessions allowed us to formulate conclusions presented in this article.

The geography of the studies includes the Siberian Federal District (the Krasnoyarsk Krai and Altai Krai, the Irkutsk, Kemerovo and Novosibirsk Regions). Focus groups were held both in the capitals and big cities of the regions of the Russian Federation and, if specific studies were required, in villages and other small settlements.

The total sample size amounted to 758 people.

The total number of focus groups was 84.

The number of one focus group ranged from 8 to 11 people. The average duration of one focus group was 120 minutes. Participants in the focus groups were selected in accordance with the following methodological requirements:

- respondents were not supposed to have been involved in focus group studies for at least six months;
- respondents employed in such spheres as sociology, marketing, advertising, public relations, journalism, and political science were excluded from the focus groups;
- taking into account the topics of the groups, respondents' participation in electoral campaigns of any kind was not allowed;
- focus group participants were not supposed to be familiar with each other;
- the group (as far as possible) reproduced the structure of the general population with respect to distribution by sex, age, and education.

The focus groups, in accordance with the methodological requirements, were conducted in pairs in a symmetric sample. This was done in order to avoid the influence of group effects on the results of the group and, as a consequence, to avoid the effect of nonsystematic displacement.

The guide of the in-depth focused interview was designed on a "straight funnel" principle. This methodological principle is described in the works by S.A. Belanovsky [1] and consists of a sequence of questions built from the most generalised to the specific and detailed ones. The questions considered in the study were divided into the following blocks:

- assessment of the respondents' changes in life and their social well-being during the past year;

- assessment of the respondents' quality of life and social well-being at the moment;
- the role of authorities in changes in the respondents' lives.

Analysis of the role of power was also divided into two blocks: the role of the federal government and the role of regional authorities.

This work is a re-analysis of the information obtained in several series of in-depth focused interviews. Full research data are not presented in this article for reasons of confidentiality. All the research procedures coincided with the aforementioned sequence of blocks.

RESULTS

Discussing the results of the study, we consider it necessary to present fragments of the focus group protocols. The fragments reflect the respondents' most characteristic statements, which are widespread and repeatedly found in the material analysed and which reflect typical opinions shared by the overwhelming majority of the participants in the groups.

The attitude towards local politicians at the municipal level was revealed via group surveys in which people gave their opinions and reactions to a political figure's name or (for the regional and municipal level) as a reaction to a local politician's name and position.

When discussing members of regional legislative bodies, we obtained the following typical responses:

Moderator: (names the surname)

Respondents: We do not know him, there are many of them, who knows all of them?...

Further, when discussing politicians, the respondents were asked to evaluate their activities and explain their evaluation. The moderator urged the participants to explain their assessment in connection with the respondents' life experience. As a result of this procedure, the following research-related trend was discovered:

Moderator: And how do you assess the activity of the mayor?

Respondents: Well, I can mark him somewhere between four or five (on a five-point scale).

Moderator: Why?

Respondent 1: Well, he knows the ropes...

Respondents 3, 4, 5, 8 are nodding.

Moderator: How does it manifest itself?

Respondent 1: (pause)

Respondent 4: He cares about the city, he often appears in the news, and well, in general, it is clear that he cares about the city ...

Moderator: How do you see this? How exactly does he care about the city?

(pause)

This fragment is repeated many times in the minutes, regardless of the position and name of the politician in question. From the point of view of the purpose of this

article, it is important for us to identify the gap between the emotional assessment of the politician (positive, as in the above-mentioned fragment) and its connection with the respondents' experience. Participants in the study fail to explain the reasons for their high evaluation of politicians and cannot link this evaluation with their own experience. Moreover, in the given fragment it is possible to see the connection between the positive attitude to a politician and his/her frequent appearance in the media. Qualitative methods of sociological research do not allow us to establish a statistically significant correlation between the frequency of a politician's appearance in mass media and his/her positive assessment, but according to the results of this series of studies, such a hypothesis can at least be put forward.

In some cases, the respondents noted a discrepancy between their positive assessment of a politician and a lack of changes in their lives, and in this case the respondents resorted to distancing techniques:

Moderator: What is the reason for such a high score?

Respondent 3: Well, I just like him!

Moderator: Why and what exactly do you like about him? At the beginning of the group, you said you did not see any changes in your life. Is this not true?

Respondents 2, 3, 7: Well, you see, he is far away from us. He can't influence our lives in any way.

It is interesting that the concept of distance itself can act as a positive and negative factor. It is closely related to the concept of political power. When assessing a politician's activity, the respondents proceeded from a certain concept of authority, which may not be related to a real situation. For example, research participants very often mixed political activity and charity.

As can be seen from the above fragments, we can distinguish several categories that characterize the respondents' attitude to power:

1. fame;
2. distance;
3. image of power;
4. assessment of a politician's activity.

Fame is a personal characteristic inseparably associated with a particular figure. The most famous representatives of the federal government, the President and the Prime Minister (V.V. Putin and D.A. Medvedev), are known to all respondents without exception.

The second characteristic of the authorities identified in this study is the distance between the government representative and the respondent. The respondents mention the distance parameter in explaining positive assessment of representatives of the federal government and negative assessment of the activities of local authorities.

The distance between the representative of power and the respondent, on the one hand, and the fame, on the other, are linked in the following way: all the respondents know the President and Prime Minister, but only in single cases they can name the members of legislative assemblies or city councils.

It is this trend discovered in the course of the study that made it possible to formulate the main problem of the research. Obviously, the activities of local authorities significantly affect respondents' lives, but this influence is not observed by the participants of the study. Moreover, representatives of the federal government tend to receive the highest assessment, and their influence on the respondents' social well-being is also perceived as the most significant one.

The respondents' see the concept of political power in a simplified way, which can be summarized in the following typical statements:

“Putin is responsible for foreign policy, Medvedev — for domestic policy”.

“We do not know what they are doing there at all” (about the members of local representative bodies of power).

The respondents were not able to form a definite opinion on the local executive power in any of the regions under study.

Evaluation of politicians' activities is connected with their image of power. In the respondents' opinion, the federal government solves global problems of state governance and, therefore, the activities of the federal government are extremely weakly related to the respondents' lives.

It is also important to note the fact that the federal government is described by the respondents as two persons – V.V. Putin and D.A. Medvedev. The average respondent does not include federal ministers and heads of federal agencies in their perception of the federal government. Also, the respondents do not include members of the State Duma and representatives of regions in the Federation Council into the federal government.

This structure of power perception gives rise to several issues. The most significant of them is that this perception leads to an asymmetric distribution of responsibility and image risks. However, a detailed examination of this problem is beyond the scope of this article.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

In the course of the research, we distinguished a key trend — a gap between the assessment of federal authorities and local (regional or municipal) authorities. This gap is particularly indicative in the context of the respondents' everyday experience.

There are several potential explanations for this fact. One of the possible ones is given in Richard Tracy LaPiere's article and is included in social psychology and sociology as the paradox of the same name (in Russian literature the term is known as *La Piere's paradox*). The definition of the paradox given by the author includes a mismatch between beliefs and behavior [9].

However, such a definition does not reveal the essence of the observed phenomenon. In the situation we are considering, there is no discrepancy between beliefs and behavior. One can speak about LaPiere's paradox only in the case of such a mismatch. Here we see a direct relationship between beliefs and behavior.

The discrepancy identified in the course of the research is of a fundamentally different kind: the authorities closest to the respondents are either unknown or re-

ceive negative assessments. On the other hand, the respondents know the authorities most remote from them and give a detailed assessment of their actions on the basis of their subjective perception.

To the direct question “How exactly does the President’s and the Prime Minister’s activities affect your life?” the participants of the research answer: “They are in Moscow, far away from us, they do not affect our lives in any way”.

The key question arising in the analysis of this discrepancy can be formulated as follows: what is the basis of the assessment obtained?

In a detailed analysis of the respondents’ answers, we can observe two trends. First, the research participants often connected their assessment with the information obtained from various media. Secondly, they did not in any way connect the changes taking place in their lives with their assessments of the policy makers.

There is a direct link between the events presented in the media and the assessments of the authorities. It can be argued that the respondents’ experience has either a minimal impact on the assessments of the authorities, or there is no such influence at all.

It is noteworthy that in the respondents’ minds, there is no causal scheme of perception of both local and federal authorities. They do not associate the authorities’ actions with changes in their lives, with the deterioration or improvement of their personal situations.

Moreover, in some cases, the picture formulated by the respondents is illogical. This can be observed in the following fragment of a dialogue:

Moderator: And how do you feel about the President?

Respondent: Very good. He does a lot for the country so that we can live better.

Moderator: At the beginning of our conversation, you said that your life had deteriorated since last year. Could you please comment on how this is related?

Respondent: Without him everything would have been even worse.

In the course of further discussion, it becomes clear that this structure of assessments is shared by the respondents, and the respondents operate with two categories of opinions and assessments. The first group of opinions and assessments is based on the respondents’ experience. Within this category, the respondents express negative assessment of their lives, based on the worsening of their personal situation, a decline in their standard of living, and a rise in prices. This series is traditional for Russian sociology; it has been extensively researched in a number of works in the Siberian region (see, for example, [9, 10]).

In the framework of the other category, the respondents give positive assessments of the President and a number of people from the federal government, but these assessments are neither based on the respondents’ experience, nor connected with it in any way. Moreover, the explanation of such a connection requires considerable effort from the respondents and often leads to active resistance.

The basis for opinions and assessments of the second category is media reports. It is within the framework of media reports that positive opinions and assessments expressed during the focus groups are formulated. This fact is of fundamental importance in terms of the goals and objectives of this study.

Let us focus once more on the main findings of the research. Positive attitude towards the representatives of the federal government is not in any way connected with the respondents' social experience and, moreover, contradicts the generalised assessment of their personal situation.

This means that such an attitude cannot be correctly interpreted within the framework of the classical concept of social relations. Social relations, as a rule, imply mutual interaction. This statement was first made by Auguste Comte and has not been subjected to a methodological revision.

Naturally, one can use the concept of social relations in a narrower sense, i.e. as a willingness to act in a certain way in relation to a person/group of people. However, this definition covers only one area, namely, electoral readiness, which is not realised in everyday social experience.

It is also important to note that in the course of the analysis of the results obtained during the focus groups, we did not register willingness to participate in mutual social interaction, but we came across one-sided relationships.

This one-sidedness allows us to formulate a hypothesis that the attitude to power is not based on social interaction, but on parasocial one.

The concept of parasocial interaction is formulated in the work *Mass Communication and Parasocial Interaction* by D. Horton and R. Wohl [4] where it is presented as interaction exclusively between the viewer and the hero of a television game show or series.

An important component of parasocial interaction is its one-sided nature. The viewer sympathises with the hero of a television film and watches his adventures with interest, which generates a noticeable emotional inclusion, but no social exchange between the viewer and the hero happens.

In addition to the one-sided nature, it can be added that parasocial relationships are emotionally saturated. This can hardly be denied: despite the actual lack of social interaction, any television show involves the viewer emotionally.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis of the materials obtained within several series of deep focused interviews allows us to say that the attitude of the residents of the Siberian Federal District to the power can often be interpreted as parasocial. There are several reasons for this conclusion. First, according to the materials of the qualitative research, we failed to identify mutual interaction (which is a characteristic feature of social relations in the full sense of the word). Second, the key component of the respondents' assessments is emotional. Further, evaluation of political figures is not related to the respondents' experience of interaction with them and does not correlate with the respondents' assessment of their own situation.

It would not be correct to interpret the data given in this article as the evidence of support for the actions of the federal government or lack thereof. These data can be interpreted as the evidence of two categories of opinions and assessments that the respondents form. The prevalence of opinions and assessments mentioned in this work should be the subject of further research.

The focus of this work is exclusively on identifying qualitative peculiarities of the respondents' attitude to representatives of federal and municipal authorities, examined on the basis of a qualitative sociological study. It should be further noted that parasocial nature of the attitude to power still remains a hypothesis. Further discussion requires an in-depth analysis with the employment of the PSR scale designed to assess parasocial relationships.

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