

PERCEPTION OF INEQUALITY IN RUSSIA
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Abstract: *this article analyzes the problem of inequality as an "idea" constructed in people's mind. It observes what people actually think about inequality and who they hold accountable for it. In order to do so the results of several public opinion surveys on inequality, justice and expected government strategy are examined. The analysis shows that while the idea of inequality in public consciousness is pretty abstract, it has strong ties with public understanding of fairness, social well-being and attitudes towards wealth.*

Keywords: *social constructivism, inequality, justice.*

ВОСПРИЯТИЕ ПРОБЛЕМЫ НЕРАВЕНСТВА В РОССИИ
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Аннотация: *в данной статье анализируется проблема неравенства как «идея», сконструированная в общественном сознании. Исследуются вопросы восприятия неравенства и слоев населения, воспринимаемых ответственными за сложившуюся ситуацию. Проводится анализ результатов опросов общественного мнения по вопросам неравенства, справедливости и ожидаемой стратегии государства. В заключении делается вывод о том, что несмотря на абстрактный характер идеи неравенства в общественном сознании, она тесно связана с представлениями общественности о справедливости, социальным самочувствием и отношением к богатству.*

Ключевые слова: *социальный конструктивизм, неравенство, справедливость.*

Perception is considered to be an active process of construction of image under the influence of energy radiated by external objects on human sensors. But the process of perceiving is also heavily depend on the particular person's experience and knowledge. In this context, a social problem is considered to be a social problem, only if it exists in the public discourse and if society actually agrees on the existence of this problem.

This is a constructivist approach, that allows talking about social inequality as an "idea" [1] in public opinion. This approach was developed by Malcolm Spector and John I. Kitsuse in the 1970s [2]. Social constructivists propose to observe social problems in rhetoric, as social activity aimed at expressing complaint and frustration towards certain state of affairs, and to abandon the equation of social problems with some set of conditions.

Each year Yuri Levada Analytical Center (Levada Center) conducts a survey, aimed at educing social problems that are considered to be the most disturbing for Russian society. Since the beginning of 2000s the first place at this rating was occupied by the Increase of prices (72% in August 2018) and the second place - by poverty / impoverishment of the majority of the population (52%) [3]. The "extreme gap between the rich and poor, income inequality" was shifting between 6 and 7 line in the rating with 30% in 2018. It is significant that the problem of poverty is considered to be more important by the public, than the problem of inequality. Corruption is 4th problem in the rating with 33% rate in 2018.

While discussing the future, people are mostly sure that the problem of socio-economic inequality and extreme gap between the rich and poor will remain one of the biggest social problems in Russia in the coming 15-20 years (36% of respondents). People believe that the government will take the necessary actions to deal with social problems, but they are not sure if these actions will work [4].

Perception of Poor and Perception of Rich.

In January of 2018 39% of respondents (first line in rating) named measures against poverty and towards the improvement of quality of life as a wishful priority in the new President's agenda and only 4% outlined the importance of fair reallocation and different types of wealth taxes [5].

The official average cost of living in Russia is evaluated at the rate of 10.329 rubles (approximately 160 USD) while based on the results of Levada Center's surveys people evaluate the real amount of money they need to survive at the level of 20.000 rubles, which is almost twice as high as the official numbers. 28% of respondents consider themselves living below the poverty line (2017) [6]. In 2015 in the survey conducted by the Fund Public Opinion (FOM) 17% of respondents considered themselves poor and 78% consider themselves as people with the middle-level income.

Slightly more than half of the respondents, 52%, would like to "become rich", and the younger the respondents are, the more they are inclined to express this desire. The wish to become rich is mostly demonstrated by respondents who hold a Degree (61%), residents of megalopolises and other large cities (57–58%).

It is worth noting that the desire to get rich and the belief that it is achievable, are closely related. Among those who believe that their chances of becoming rich are great, 79% actually would want it (versus 18% who don't want it). And among those who exclude the possibility of getting rich, only 35% say they would like it (versus 60%). So we can assume that some people "refuse" wealth because of their perception of unattainability [9].

Strive for "better life" and wealth usually is a natural motive, but there are still 18% who do not want it. It is useful to understand what stands at the origins of such unwillingness. In most cases, respondents say they would not like to face issues, such as responsibility, anxiety, which, in their opinion, are associated with wealth (14%). Some are satisfied with their current material status, saying it is "enough" (9%). And most interesting, some people link wealth with poor moral judgements (5%). They think that money has had influence on people and they judge wealth. When asked, what allows a person to become wealthy, 13% outline a person's ability to work a lot, 13% outline the importance of cleverness, etc., and approximately the same amount of people (other 13%) come up with the idea of unscrupulous, arrogant people. 63% of respondents, when asked about influence of money on personal qualities, agree that it has bad influence (versus 31%). And only 36% think that poverty has bad influence on people's attitudes and behaviours (versus 56%) [9].

Another survey shows that almost half of the respondents (49%) think that it is impossible to become rich by honest means today (2014) as well as it was impossible to do so 15-20 years ago. 15% of respondents think that it is impossible today, while 15-20 years ago it was more likely [7].

There is a clearly twofold attitude towards wealth. On one hand, people in most cases desire to become wealthy. On the other hand, there is a clear trend of antipathy towards rich people and their personal qualities.

Fairness Of The System And The Elite

In a separate survey conducted by FOM about the fairness of the progressive tax. Most of the respondents (54%) support the idea of this tax system. People see the positive effect of progressive tax in yield increase in state budget (15%), increase in tax burden for rich (10%), overall fairness (8%) and decrease of tax burden for poor (7%), etc. While the major negative effect is seen in the tax avoidance by wealthy part of population (17%). I must also mention, that approximately half of the respondents could not name any pros (49%) and cons (61%) [10], which evidences that people do not actually understand the real effect of progressive tax on population and economy and most likely, their support results from the idea of "rich paying more" itself.

While judging the fairness in Russian society as a whole, people mostly consider modern Russian society as "unjust" (61% versus 23%). When asked about the reasons, why people consider society unfair, 16% of respondents point at social inequality, 9% outline low level of life, 5% talk about corruption and subterfuge. Also, people think that while there are a lot of social groups that should receive (more) support from the government, such as the elderly, the disabled, etc, there are also some groups that receive government support, while they should not. In aggregate 26% of respondents consider elected officials, public servants, the "rich" (oligarchy) and the "power" (or elites) itself to be groups, that receive government support unjustly [11]. This result is expected as people have deeper emotional ties with these groups - they understand one's own dependence on them. This is also the reason, why people are so irritated with political elites showing their fortune, which is considered to be acquired not legally [8].

Conclusion

As we could see from the statistics above, people think of inequality in the two dimensions. First is the dimension of poor, the group, who is in the constant conditions of surviving and needs support from government. In most cases this is the association that comes to peoples mind, when asked of the social problems in modern Russian society. Poverty is the first idea that comes into mind when thinking of the country's socio-economic strategy as the problem that requires more attention from the government. Second dimension is the rich and those who are "in power". While thinking over the fairness of society people start arguing about the unfair position in society given to rich people, the position, from which they benefit even more. Poverty is a clear concept in people's mind as social problem, while wealth is an image that makes people jealous and angry, as it is solidly linked with the idea of fairness.

As for perception of inequality as a sound concept - it is still a very volatile, unframed idea. It is closely linked with both: objective understanding of material assets in one's possession as well as with the estimation of the system's fairness.

45% of respondents think that it is impossible for them to become wealthy, other 31% think that the chances of them becoming rich are small and only 14% see the real possibility of becoming wealthy.[9] We can see that almost a half of respondents fully deny the possibility to reach high level of income, which leads us to believe, that people see obvious restraints in social mobility. This idea has a direct connection with the perception of injustice in modern Russian society.

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