



Social Psychology

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The Social-constructionistic approach in research of political identity

In the article in the frameworks of social-constructionistic theory the phenomenon of political identity is examined and submitted as a project designed in a discourse. The discourse-analysis is used as a basic method. The research reveals both four types of political identity: included, estranged, conformistic and idealistic; and factors influencing on forming of these types. The results of the research have confirmed an opportunity of influence on forming of political identity through the structure of a discourse that is an actual goal in a modern situation of political estrangement of a significant number of Russian citizens.

Key words: political identity, factors of political identity, a political reality, social constructionism, a discourse, a discourse-analysis.

The concept of identity, which covers both emotional self-experiences of an individual and a personal activity, and national features, has become one of the main subjects in the modern society. Many problems from the economic, political and cultural sphere, finally, prove to be questions of identity. Against the background of reforming of institutes of the society and the state, the problem of political identity causes a genuine interest in researchers. In spite of a great number of theoretical elaborations and empirical researches, which have been accumulated by social sciences, this problem does not lose its urgency.

Political identity is necessary to be understood as «a subject's identification of him/herself with a certain political position recognized by the other subjects of political relations» [4]. Political identity actually turns out to be such a sort of a group belonging by means of which the subject him/herself realizes this belonging and is guided by it in his/her political behaviour. Today the fact that political identity plays an essential role in the process of forming of «an external behaviour» of an individual does not raise doubts any more: with the help of political identity an individual or a group becomes a subject of political relations and political process.

The phenomenon of political identity poses some questions for researchers. On the one hand, these questions concern: what consequences of that fact that we categorize ourselves in a definite way are? On the other hand, what determines that we categorize ourselves in a definite way?

One of the major components of the analysis of social psychology is the area of social cognition where categorizing acts as a starting point and by means of which an ordering



and systematization of outward things are originated. Questions about categorizing are revealed in cognitive psychology. In this case, with reference to political identity, it is pertinent to introduce a concept of «an objectively existing world», learning which allows the subject to formulate ideas and values of this world, to be guided in political field, and to perform functions inherited in it in politics. However the world is not univariate and the process of self-categorizing of an individual in politics can be considered not as a reflection of the existing world, but as a creation, designing of new worlds. In this case identity is represented in the form of a certain project, a form-factor, which is determined by the way of estimation of the individual of this or that factor bringing as a result to self-categorizing.

The idea of a designed reality has developed within the framework of a separate scientific trend which in social psychology has received the name of social constructionism. From the position of social constructionism «the knowledge about politics, produced by means of involving meanings and senses in it and mutual exchanging of these senses according to the accepted rules, is a discursive formation». In other words, the political reality, as well as its separately taken images, is designed in a discourse during which «local, relatively steady, but historically and cultural mobile “forms of understanding of the world and this reality” are arising. These “forms”, i.e. descriptions and explanations of a political reality (in the form of linguistic images), act as constituting elements, making also an integral part of social patterns and samples (behavioural, communicative, cognitive, linguistic)» [1]. Thus, our way of contacting does not reflect the world, identities and social mutual relations, but, on the contrary, it plays an active role in its creation and changing. «With the help of language we create a representation about a political reality, which does not only reflect its content, but also designs it. It does not mean that the political reality itself does not exist, but it means that only meanings and representations about it are real». [2] Certainly, physical objects (for example, the building of the State Duma, political leaders) also exist, but they also take on their significance only due to a discourse. Thus, attaching significance to something in discourses creates and changes the world and ideas about it. In this case political identity can be defined as an identification of a person with a subject position in the structure of a discourse.

The sight at identity as on a certain formation designed in a discourse, has underlain our research, *the object* of which is political identity. *The purpose of the research* was to reveal features of political identity and factors influencing on its forming.

The version of the discursive analysis – the critical discourse-analysis (CDA) offered by Farclou and Wodock – was used as the basic method of the research. Free compositions on the subject of «I and politics» were used as material for research. Respondents were offered to determine themselves a structure and contents of their compositions. The only demand which was made to the compositions was an interpretation of concepts used in the work. Authors of the compositions were students of 19 – 35 years old of internal and correspondence forms of education. 100 works were taken for the analysis. The research did not take into consideration the age and gender differences.

At the first investigation phase the contents of statements of the respondents describing the essence of a politics were studied. Research of nouns used in the self-description provides



perceiving the contents of the statements. There is an opportunity to pick out explanations of essence of politics, which included a certain share of interpretation. For example:

(1) *For me politics is a struggle for power, it is somewhere far away.*

(2) *Politics is one of business cards of this or that country; it is one of the major characteristics of the position of the state, because attitudes of other countries of the world community are under construction according to it.*

(3) *Politics is not an ordinary business, and to make a career in this walk of life, it is necessary to understand people very well.*

The explanation of essence of politics varies in the examples. In example (1) politics is considered as a struggle for power, with specification of that fact that it realizes without any electorate. Expression «somewhere far away» functions as an explanation of estrangement of politics from the author of the statement. In example (2) politics is represented as the major characteristic of the state. The author introduces the explanation of its importance with the help of conjunction «because», which precisely designates a causal relationship between the position of the state and the attitude of other countries to it. At last, in example (3) the author represents politics as a professional activity. The explanation of complexity of this activity for the author is introduced with the help of the infinitive with «to». It is important to note that definitions of politics were not given by the researchers beforehand; the definition of the essence of the given phenomenon was given by the respondents independently. The received definitions of politics were considered by the researchers as the contents of individual political consciousness expressing the perception of politics.

The analysis of materials included the analysis of the reasons describing politics and a political life. The received data were interpreted. And at the same time elements of the text were compared according to contents and to the form in order to reveal similarities and differences in explanations of essence of politics. As Potter and Wezeral mark, explanations were not so much distinguished by the principle «what has been told in a fragment», as by the principle «in what way these fragments have been made and what linguistic resources the authors of compositions have used» [6]. The special attention was given to two aspects of the explanation. The first aspect is the author's description of essence of politics which takes into consideration the distinguished subjects-«supporter». The second aspect is a manner of the author to describe his/her role and participation in politics and in a political life of the country.

As a result of the analysis four types of identity have been discovered. **The first type** is «identity of the included type». Explanations with the help of the given repertoire are under construction around the idea that any person is capable to influence on politics («politics is created by a person», «I would like to emphasize a role of influence of a person on politics»). Among language units frequently appearing during this approach it is necessary to point out such as: *a personality, each of us, any person, every person*, and also such active verbs, as: *to influence, to have an active position*. **The second type** is «identity of the estranged type». It characterizes politics as an activity of separate persons (politicians). The authors of compositions precisely separate themselves from politics.



Methods with the help of which the authors draw a distinction between themselves and politics are usage of following expressions: «... *it is what our politicians live with*»; «*I have no relation to it*». Thus, the authors of compositions oppose themselves («far» from politics) to politicians (other people involved in politics). **The third type** is «identity of the conformistic type». Explanations by means of conformistic repertoire are reduced to the statement that politics is a struggle for power in which all citizens are included. The authors explain the role of citizens in struggle for power by their constitutional law «to elect and to be elected». The authors formulate explanations of conformistic repertoire with the help of the language techniques including following expressions: «... *because there are a lot of vanity around them and everyone speaks about it*», «... *everybody voted*», «... *many people consider*», «*everybody is dissatisfied*». The feature of this repertoire consists in absence of one's own beliefs and points of view. The approach is based on orientation to the opinion of the majority («many», «all», «everybody»). **The fourth type** is «identity of the idealistic type». It defines politics as institutional formation, a kind of a professional activity «*accessible to any citizen by his/her willingness*». The important characteristic of this type consists in belief of the respondents in an opportunity to influence on politics, to determine prospects of further development of the society and the state. The authors of compositions speak about interest to a social and political life, and at the same time they provide themselves with a subject role. The degree of a personal participation in a political life is determined by only their own desire.

The structure and features of an origin of the statements were also analyzed. The concept of process in free self-descriptions relates to synchronistical (situational) and diachronistical displays of the Self-concept in various social contexts. One of the ways of studying processes in free self-descriptions is a classification of verbs. A classification was chosen according to the level of abstractiveness of verbs and the dictionary of verbs which had been used by respondents in compositions in the context of the description of their own participation in a political life was made.

The model distinguishing a degree of abstractiveness of expressed actions was constructed with the help of the method of an expert estimation. Teachers of the sub-faculty of the Russian language were experts and estimated verbs from the composed dictionary according to the degree of abstractiveness of expressed actions by the scale from 1 to 10.

At the second investigation phase the influence of the type of political identity and emotional attitude of the respondents to politics on the level of abstractiveness of descriptions of this phenomenon was revealed. The type of identity and emotional attitude are independent variables presented in a non-metric (nominative) scale. The revealed level of abstractiveness is a metric dependent variable. As a consequence of the multiple-factor dispersion analysis the following results were received.

The low level of abstractiveness of descriptions is characteristic for identity of the included type with a negative emotional estimation of politics and political events. It is discovered that at the included type of the description of politics with a neutral emotional estimation the level of abstractiveness of these descriptions increases up to the mark of an average level. Identity of the conformistic type is inherent an average level of



abstractiveness of descriptions of politics both at a negative and at a neutral estimation of a political life. Identity of the estranged type shows a high degree of abstractiveness of descriptions of essence of politics at a negative estimation of political events, and abstractiveness of descriptions is reduced up to an average level at a neutral estimation. At last the highest level of abstractiveness of descriptions is shown by the respondents with identity of the idealistic type and a positive estimation of this phenomenon of politics.

Thus, we have defined four types of political identity and levels of abstractiveness of descriptions and explanations of phenomenon of politics inherent to these types.

The third investigation phase was devoted to revealing the factors influencing on forming of political identity in a discourse. For solving this problem on the basis of already received research material a questionnaire was elaborated which included a set of statements, allowing us to reveal attitudes of the respondents to meanings of separate marks making the structure of a political discourse. 200 people took part in the research. The dispersion analysis revealed the influence of independent variables, representing marks making the structure of a political discourse in works of our respondents (an estimation of a political policy, a trust to politicians, an attitude to reforms), on identification of the types revealed during research.

Thus, the following results submitted in the table have been received.

Table 1**Factors of political identity**

Nº	The factor	Identity of the included type	Identity of the estranged type	Identity of the conformistic type	Identity of idealistic type
1	An estimation of a political policy	–	–	–	–
2	Trust to politicians	–	–	–	–
3	The attitude to politics	–	0,002	–	–
4	Amount of information	0,003	0,002	–	–
5	The attitude to political news	–	–	–	–
6	Participation in elections	0,005	–	–	–
7	Expectations	0,001	0,001	0,001	–
8	Management of the life	–	–	0,002	–
9	Satisfaction with the quality of the life	–	0,002	–	0,004
10	The attitude to reforms	0,003	–	–	0,001
11	Adherence to political forces	0,002	0,003	–	0,002
12	Adaptation to reforms	0,004	0,003	–	–
13	Accessibility of political systems	–	–	–	0,005
14	A role of authorities in a life of citizens	0,001	–	0,001	–
15	Awareness on functions of authority	–	–	–	–

The table shows a degree of influence of the factors on the type of political identity presented in the p-significance level. Factors (Nº 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14), which p-significance level is <0.005, and which influence on more than one type of political identity, are common. In the political discourse they form a basis for the type of identity. Factors (Nº 3, 6, 8, 13), influencing only on one type of identity, are specific, determining features of the given



type of political identity. In the table there are factors (№ 1, 2, 5, 15), which p-significance level is >0.005 , and this fact indicates about their low statistical significance in the given research. However, there is no escape from taking into account their role, because during multiple-factor study of influence of independent variables on the type of identity we have revealed pair combinations of factors, which p-significance level of influence is <0.005 , that points out on their essential influence on forming features of political identity. So, as a result of solving research tasks we have revealed the following. **Identity of the included type** is determined by the influence of such factors, as amount of information, participation in elections, adherence to the political forces, an adaptation to reforms and a role of political authority's bodies in the life of citizens. The combinations of the following factors, influencing on forming the given type of identity have become statistically significant: factors of accessibility of political systems and awareness on functions of authority in cooperation with the factor of a role of authority's bodies in the life of citizens. It shows that significance of these variables has no value in itself and only in combination with the factor of a role of authority's bodies it gets urgency, influencing on forming identity.

Such variables as the attitude to politics, satisfaction with the quality of the life, adherence to political forces, an adaptation to reforms influence on forming **identity of the estranged type**. **Identity of conformistic type** is formed in a discourse, in which structure the following factors get urgency: expectations, management of the life, a role of authority's bodies in the life of citizens; and also such combinations of factors as the attitude to reforms and adherence to political forces; an estimation of a political policy and trust to politicians.

At last **identity of the idealistic type** is formed with the influence of factors: satisfaction with the quality of the life, the attitude to reforms, adherence to political forces, accessibility of political systems, and also with combinations of factors: amount of information and an estimation of a political policy; an estimation of a political policy and trust to politicians; adherence to political forces and an adaptation to reforms.

The consideration of political identity as a project, designed in a discourse, allows us to examine a phenomenon of political identity from the position of its contents and to reveal factors influencing on it. Including these factors into the structure of a discourse and attaching significance to them in a discourse enable to influence on forming the type of political identity, and this is an actual task in a modern situation of political estrangement of a significant number of Russian citizens.

The literature

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