

Conference Paper

Russian Working Class Youth Media Representation: The Discourse Analysis Experience

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to investigate the recent discursive turn in working class representation in the Russian media. The means of creation and translation of normative class patterns, stereotypes and political agency within Russian media have been studied using the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis. The empirical basis of the research is the textual transcripts of the key communicative events marking the working class as a political subject. The qualitative analysis allowed us to distinguish the rhetorical techniques and semiotic resources of working-class representation in the political field: thematic repertoire, format, practices which interlocutors use in addressing each other, language style and naming. It has been established that the forgotten concept of a “working class” was actualized and entrenched in the official political discourse in 2011. It was borrowed from left-wing political forces and re-assembled as one of the means of ruling class positioning in the 2011–2012 electoral cycle. Industrial working class representatives were included in public discourse as a part of the political staging, the consequences of which led to minor social changes. The populist discourse of working-class politicians as a “voice of common people” was constructed to oppose it to the protesting “creative class” threatening the main political force. The short-term political goal of power agents was to represent working-class people and youth especially as a political subject loyal to the existing regime, embedded into the current political system and ready to defend it if necessary. The nostalgic rhetorical technics were primarily used to re-launch “working class project”.

Keywords: working class, working-class youth, discourse analysis, populism, political discourse.

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1. Introduction

During the fundamental changes of the world capitalistic order, post-Soviet Russia was going through a long transitional period which led to the consolidation of power hierarchies of a particular type. The restructuring of the economy sectoral composition was ideologically based on the specific form of neoliberalism [12] finished with violent

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deindustrialization [3: 399], the dramatic surge of precarious work and shadow economic practices [9; 12: 203]. The small group of big property keepers uses the main part of the state resources including human capital assets [11]. Global research centers detect the rise of social inequality in Russia in the nearest years [2: 159]. In what follows, class formation processes have become apparent and the forgotten concepts of “class” and “class antagonism” have acquired relevance again. The most vulnerable group today is working-class youth whose life chances were initially restricted and within the abovementioned structural limitations has lowered even more. Our previous research indicates that 78 per cent of working-class Russian youth earn less than USD450 a month, 37 per cent earn USD300 a month or less [8: 140]. These problems especially concern young workers of a service sector where two-thirds of the working-class youth is engaged. In comparison with an industrial working class they do not have a historical background for the class identity and solidarity and they are not represented in the state, public and scientific discourses at all. Ignoring the changed structure of this group in the post-industrial world, the power agents, however, put many efforts to shape its desirable media image as an agent of political and labor sphere in order to achieve long-term and short-term goals.

The subject domain of this study is the working-class youth representation in contemporary Russian media space, the creation and translation of class normative patterns and stereotypes. The objective of this particular article is to report the results of the discourse analysis aimed to investigate resent discursive turn in working class representation in Russian media space as an agent of political space.

2. Methodology and Methods

Discursive strategies of working class representation have significantly changed since Soviet times. In the period of industrialization (1930–1950) the image of the working class as a hegemonic social force, the backbone of state policy, the source of progressive changes and moral authority served well-known political purposes. In post-Soviet times social status and representation of this group have gone through significant changes from deprived manual workers who tried to survive and stand for their rights in the 1990s on the ruined industrial enterprises back to the picture of them as basic government support in 2010s. While western critical discourse studies scientists pointed out that a working class in neoliberal age is being depicted through a middle-class gaze as a morally flawed underclass with inappropriate style, taste and manners [5–7, 10], in Russia the same pattern was also popular in entertainment media in 2000s when newly born

middle class was shaping its positive identity on the contrast with the ridiculed image of a “gopnic” [1]. In official media of that period, the social position of a worker was also represented as a result of individual adaptation failure.

The empirical dataset used in the research includes the speeches of the political leaders on the official events. These events have been selected due to their key role in shaping the current political agenda concerning working-class people, and working-class youth in particular. We have analyzed textual transcripts of these communicative events which contain statements marking the working class as a certain political subject, placing it in the political system and forming its political identity:

1. The annual videoconferences “The hotline with V.V. Putin” (from the first broadcast which was released on December 24, 2001, till the last one in 2019). This event is presented as an annual direct communication of the country’s leader with the people. This communication format assumes that ordinary citizens ask the leader of the country questions live on federal-state channels, and he answers them.
2. The awards ceremonies of the professional skills contest for youth “Glorify the Man of Labor”, associated with the social and political movement “In Defense of the Person of Labor”, from the first ceremony in 2012 till the present. One of the goals of the project is the formation of a respectful attitude towards a working-class man in the public consciousness, the popularization of working specialties, the revival of professional skill contests at the regional and federal levels, increasing the labor and socio-political activity of young people [15].

The model of critical discourse analysis [4, 13] allowed us to regard the examples of media discourse texts as a kind of ritualized traditional social practice, the procedure of which corresponds with the archaic forms of democratic representation and gives control over collective consciousness through ideology. Regarding it as a discursive practice organized according to certain rules, we distinguish the rhetorical techniques and semiotic resources of working-class representation as an agent of political space: thematic repertoire, format, practices which interlocutors use in addressing each other, ways of collective self-representation, language style, naming. The deeper analysis reveals cognitive settings, categorizations of the life-worlds and models of interpretation.

3. Result and Discussion

It has been established that the concept of “working class” was actualized and entrenched in the official political discourse in 2011. It was borrowed from left-wing

political forces and re-assembled as one of the means of ruling class positioning in the 2011–2012 electoral cycle. The construction of new meanings in working-class discourse happened simultaneously with the appearance on the political field of so-called “creative class” which actively positioned itself as an opponent of a current government and political regime. This can be interpreted as one of the main factors that served as the impetus for launching the project “Glorify a Man of Labor”. Let us deploy these arguments in particular examples.

First of all, it's worth to emphasize that the working class as a major social group in all analyzed events is narrowed to the representation of white male workers of industrial enterprises standing together in coveralls and helmets. The new working class which comprises mostly service routine workers [8: 97] is not represented at all, as well as women and people of non-Slavonic ethnicity. The masculine image of the working class has obvious interdiscursive connections with popular sketch-show characters of “Nasha Russia” (“Our Russia”), where the comic image of “severe Chelyabinsk (Note — Ural industrial city) worker” has been created.

Vertical methods of communication close to the Soviet ones were actively used in the examined texts. The personalized character of power is embodied in the key ritual constitutive for the discourse when the indisputable leader of the nation greets and give benefits to the grateful “common people” being at the moment their final hope and authority:

”— And they [factory's authorities] want to drive me out because I speak a lot, with a strong worker's language” (a turner complains to the prime-minister about the upcoming reduction of the workforce)

“— I've kept you in mind. They won't drive you out” (the prime minister promised).

The populist rhetorical tactics of identity shaping and responsibility redistribution were frequently used by political leaders. Answering complaints of the workers the president distanced him from bureaucratic structures in general and even from his immediate subordinates. Using the pronouns “we/us” helped him to unite with the people in contrast with “they/them” naming of corrupted or inefficient officials. We have taken an example which shows how the leader deals with requests marking the borders between levels of power and inverts the existing social roles finishing with the joint “the leader = common people”:

“For all of us and for you as a citizen of the Russian state, it is important that we have these 20 trillion roubles, which we allocated until 2020 to re-equip the army and navy so that they would work efficiently. So that we really increase the country's defense capability... We need things. Things like rockets, airplanes, submarines, surface ships

— and, moreover, high-quality ones are needed. But the fact that they allow these public statements is certainly unacceptable, and we have already spoken with them on this subject. Hope it will be heard” (V.V. Putin answers the complaint about ineffective management of the minister of defense).

Other senior officials tend to use the same technique:

“And we are all northern people, who have passed all two-thirds of their conscious life shoulder to shoulder with craftsmen, drillers, tractor drivers, bulldozer drivers, welders, shooters, road builders, oil workers, gas workers, today we perceive with special feeling this Nizhny Tagil site. We understand who really lays the bricks in the infrastructure of oil and gas complex...” (A.M. Kim, a vice-governor of Khanti-Mansi Autonomous Area speaks on the first award ceremony “Glorify a Man of Labor”).

Taking into account the great number of social gap indicators between upper and lower classes, the authorities realize and articulate widely the necessity of building bridges between elites and working-class people. The lack of fundamental trust was pronounced openly on the first award ceremony “Glorify a Man of Labor” by I.R. Kholmanskih, a former worker of the Uralvagonzavod (Note — a plant which produces military vehicles) worker who previously claimed his loyalty to the government and readiness to struggle against the protesting “creative class” so eagerly that became later an object of ridicule (“We are ready to go out with the guys and defend “stability”) [14]. However, after that speech, he quickly acquired a higher state job position as a plenipotentiary representative of the president in the Ural Federal District. He was dismissed in June 2018 when the political goals were achieved. Within the analyzed event his role was also to play “vox populis”:

“The contest is needed, but the point is not so much in the competition, but in the fact that the voice of a working person, the voice of a man of labor should be decisive in modern Russia. We have to overcome the barriers that exist between the government and society. We must trust each other, power, state and work together for the benefit of our Motherland, our Russia. It is such contests as “Glorify a Man of Labor” serve this goal” (I.R. Kholmanskih, a plenipotentiary representative of the president in the Ural Federal District).

The necessity to elaborate the respective attitude toward industrial workers was also underlined by other officials:

“This is a truly significant and ideologically very important event. The supreme power of the Ural region [...] honor, they shake hands, they say thanks to the best workers of the Urals Federal District. Perhaps it is something like a revolution in the brain. This is an unequivocal sign to all elites, all heads of state authorities, all heads of enterprises,

that we must appreciate the working man, say thanks to him, listen to him and take into account his opinion" (A.L. Vetluzhskiyh, a chairman of the Association of Trade Union Organizations of the Ural Federal District).

Nevertheless, it is visible that the reasons for the sudden rise of respectful attitude towards working class (except non-articulated but self-evident political goals) are the utilitarian role of this social group as a labor force and, in particular, the necessity to create life benefits for the rich:

"This is a real show... a show of men of labor, those who feed us, dress, make it possible for us to live in comfortable and beautiful housing. These are the people without whom nothing can happen in this life" (O.A. Bogomolov, a governor of the Kurgan District)

"The working man is the salt of our land, and only thanks to him there is a progressive movement in the development of each branch of the economy and our country as a whole... Large-scale infrastructure projects are being implemented in our district, which requires an infusion of a significant number of the working class. The emphasis is precisely on the vocational education training" (V.P. Guz, a vice-governor of the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous District).

The abovementioned quotes appeal to the style and naming which create a clear interdiscursive connection to the Soviet political speeches. The name of the contest, re-establishment of the governmental award "The Hero of Labor", pathetic start of the ceremony and semantic structures of the speeches bring back the narrative schemes, metaphors and speech acts of the Soviet past which are perceived nowadays by the new generation of young workers only as a part of a mythological structure.

It is shown in the regarded texts that paternalist rhetoric of power agents is shared and supported by the working-class representatives. One of the main mechanisms which make this kind of narrative work is the contrast based on the fears from the past. Interdiscursive connections of the analyzed piece are embodied in a popular topic of "the 90s". Addressing to the period of sharp deindustrialization and social structure demolition ("Don't you want it to be like in the 90s, do you?") helps to present the current situation in a labor sphere as "stable" = "perspective" and therefore good for people. In the discourse under study "stability" means a "perspective" not to lose a job:

"In difficult times, Vladimir Vladimirovich, you came to our enterprise and helped us. Thank you for that. Today our team of many thousands has orders, has a salary, has a perspective, and we very much value this stability. We do not want to go back" (I.R. Kholmanskiy pronounces a key speech on the hotline with the president).

The officials also appealed to the traumatic experience of the revolutions:

“Now I address to all Russians, address to all of you. The question is not to bring trouble to Russia. We have experienced many troubles. No need for great revolutions” (V.V. Yakushev, one more deputy from the working class).

Another example of using contrast to shape the positive identity of working class is the opposition between “hard-working people who create country wealth with their hands” and “highly-paid pop-stars” and “glamour clubbers”. The main virtue of the working-class is represented as “creating material and spiritual wealth of a country”, the projective goal for the society is the respective attitude towards “the fair and conscientious labor”. This is the start of an old-new ideological project of shaping a political manifest: the working class as a major social group loyal to the government. This re-launch of the working-class project was the first attempt to use this category in Russian public discourse since Soviet times.

4. Conclusions

According to the results of our analysis, the re-launch of “working-class project” was almost entirely a part of the election campaign, a political staging, the consequences of which led to minor social changes. The purpose was to construct the discourse of working-class politicians as a “voice of common people” and then oppose it to the “creative class” who went out to the streets protesting against the results of the Parliament elections. On the final stage, texts were generated which, from the one hand, sounded like new working-class manifests, but from the other hand, marked this group as a political agent loyal to the existing regime and embedded into the current political system.

This conclusion is reinforced by the almost complete disappearance of the discourse about the working class political role from media after the presidential election in 2012. We could observe the reference towards this discourse which had a significant effect only once when the president started the last election campaign in 2018 from the announcement of the decision to participate in the competition on the background of the uniformed workers of the automobile enterprise “GAZ”. Nevertheless, the actualization of the working class discourse at the official level did not finish with the formation of a certain positive identity of the working class; its representatives did not acquire the features of active political subjects or became influential players in the political field. But the short-term goals of the political strategists were certainly achieved.

On the next stage of our research, it is necessary to study more closely the interconnections between the attitude of working-class youth towards official media discourses

and their civil agency and engagement as parts of the identity. The hypothesis is that the formation of paternalist political subjectivity could be interpreted, altogether with other factors, as a result of the successive influence of official ideology through media.

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