Social Inequalities: Media Approaches and Society Expectations

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with the ways of media coverage of financial and ethnic distinctions in society. Analysis is based on the comparative Russian-Swedish research of regional media. The research revealed that material divides are mostly covered through several discourses: Social policies aimed at elimination of material differences, information on individual solutions for financial problems, mass media as the helpline for the underprivileged. The audience in Russia finds the coverage of these problems unsatisfactory as it does not touch the structural material divides. The "disparity" discourse was apparent in discussions of ethnic divides and migration. Media also do not present ethnic differences as inequalities; they are either built into the overall context of material divides or placed into "us and they" discourse.

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JEL Classifications: Z13, Z1, Z18, H75, I38, J18

1. INTRODUCTION

Social inequality issues are the subject of acute anxiety of Russians. A survey conducted by Levada-Center in August 2011 showed that amid the problems that the respondents found most disturbing, number two (after growing prices) was "poverty, impoverishment of the majority" (52% of the respondents), and number six was "gap between the rich and the poor, unfair distribution of wealth" (27%) (What Problems, 2011). However, according to the Russian Public Opinion Research Center Survey of June 15-16, 2013, currently the Russians see the main threat to the country in its re-population by other nationalities (35% believe such a scenario to be feasible), and a sharp decline in the standard of living takes only seventh place (22%) (National Threats Rating, 2013).

There is an evident dynamics of threat assessment during the last 10 years. In 2003, according to a survey by Institute of Complex Strategic Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, the Russians saw the tension between the rich and the poor as the most serious one, placing it first (44%), while the tension between the Russians and non-Russians stood second, marked by 37.2% of the respondents (Sociology of the Rich and the Poor, 2003). In

2002 Levada-Center reported that 45% of respondents believed that the number of newcomers should be reduced; in 2005 it went up to 59%. Respectively, the number of those who believe that there should be no additional administrative barriers to ban the "outsiders" declined significantly. In 2002 it was the stance taken by 44%, in 2004 by 38%, a year later 36% (Russians' Attitude, 2005).

The growing tensions in today's society carry a potential threat of social disruptions, being a multi-aspect social problem. Survey data by Institute of Global Research and Social Movements show that most of the civil unrest in Russia that had reached its peak in the spring of 2010 was caused by the crisis and by growing social divides (Gorshkov, 2010). There is a growing consensus among the people that "inequalities should no longer be treated as soft social issues" that can safely be subordinated to more fundamental interests in maximizing total economic output. It is evident that modern combination of material inequalities with other ones (race, gender, heath, education, access to political life, etc.) gives further dangerous macro-level and micro-level effects (Grusky and Ku, 2008). The fairly widespread migrant-phobia with daily social privations might create an explosive environment, detrimental to the social and political stability in Russia.

That is why, in particular, social inequalities issues became one of the main part of comparative Russian-Swedish research "media discourses on material and ethnic gaps" (2013-1014), performed with the financial support of the Baltic and East European Studies Foundation (Sweden). The project appeared a prolongation of previous cooperation in comparative empirical studies (Feilitzen and Petrov, 2011; Korkonosenko, 2014). In this case it was hypothetically expected that there were different views on the subject from the society and media experts, on the one side, and real state of affairs in media content, on the other side. So, the aim of the article is to reveal the ways of social inequalities media coverage (in the aspect of material and ethnic differences) and whether this practice coincides with social expectations.

2. BACKGROUND

Material divides discourse is topical for post-Perestroika Russia. The 1990s abolition of paternalistic State-Society relationship model caused dynamic shifts in the material divides between the citizens. Social differences are revealed in various aspects of life; they can be connected with material issues but can be influenced by other factors as well. The perception of social divides is influenced by the countries' political, cultural and historic traditions, they are set against the current system of values, moral rules and standards, and are consequently perceived as either just or unjust. Ryvkina points out that perception of divides depends on the "degree of tension" within the society (Rivkina, 2003).

Sociologists have been observed the growth of negative attitudes to migration process since middle 90s and tended to treat it as a result of the native population lost of guarantees. The ideology of internationalism existed during the Soviet period, has undergone challenges in connection with the collapse of the Soviet Union, refugee flows as a result of inter-ethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet territory, then the influx of migrant workers, both from the former Soviet republics, as well as from abroad. As a rule, the term "immigrant" also includes the repatriates from the former Soviet republics.

Correlation and mutual reinforcement of inequalities were noted by many researchers (Gorshkov, 2010; Gontmaher, 2000; Kim, 2012; Skaratan and Iljin, 2006). Specificity of the Russian situation was also reflected in the results of a survey conducted in 2003 (Petuhov et al., 2003). A general poll showed that the Russians, while still maintaining a fairly high degree of tolerance (74% believe that all people, irrespective of their sex, age, nationality, religion, etc. should be equally protected by the law), still tend to pose the question on acceptability and viability of rights restrictions for certain citizens that they believe are detrimental to the society (16%). Thus, while the Moscovites, for example, tended to sympathize with the migrants from Byelorussia and the Ukraine (83%), their counterparts from the Caucasus irritated them (76%). Thus, using Merton-Giddens typology, many Russians can be qualified as "good-weather liberals" who believe that they are prejudice-free, yet whenever their interests are at stake, they tend to support discrimination of the minorities (Giddens, 1999). This proves that hidden aggressive attitude to newcomers can be revealed in a case of material divides.

However, the experts point out that the problem of social divides still remains on the margins of public politics. "At best, the problems of divides are discussed by the experts, primarily by economists, sociologists, political analysts. While the position of the society on such a key issue as social divides in post-reform Russia must be defined and publicly politically articulated. Only in this case the position can turn into a real force that will bridge the gaps, into a foundation for an adequate model of social policy that is essential for the Russian society" (Gorshkov, 2010).

Media play a crucial part in the process of citizen's awareness of the personal problems to be common for society and individual, as well as society awareness of the problems. And also they are able to construct social problems for the society consciousness. Inequality issues articulation in media can influence the development of the problems and the society attitude to them in ambivalent way. According to Hilgartner and Bosk and the theory of "public arenas," as far as the majority of social problems do not touch most of the people, the impact of dominant elites and media often determines public mind. Discussion, selection, identification, formulation, dramatization, design and representation of social problems take place in media (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988). In case of tension or conflict media can help to overcome the dangerous situation or aggravate it (Lynch and Galtung, 2010; Fairclough, 1995). A. Hall stated, that news create senses in the frames of existing social standards and rules, used to conservative mode of thinking and in accordance with the interests of dominant groups (Hall, 1980). Moreover modern discourse media practices has a significant impact on a holistic understanding of the phenomena of reality, as facts and events are integrated into relevant and familiar discourses and are interpreted within these discourses (Berezhnaia, 2014; Savitskaya, 2009).

Ryvkina points out that there are two languages – ways of expression – in Russian reality (Rivkina, 2003). First is the language of social problems, its main constituents are "poverty," "unemployment," "crime," "safety," "underworld," "social conflict," "social divides," "shadow economy," "lawlessness," "assassin," etc. Let's note that it is focused on the aspect of threats and help to grasp the importance of them. This is the "language of the crowd" now. The second is the language of "unfair divides," and it is still out of the mass practice. This language exactly helps to understand the realities in terms of injustice and contains the intention to overcome the situation and find a positive way out.

3. METHODS AND RESULTS

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in the empirical project: Content analysis, in-depth expert interviews, and focus groups. The period of empirical research covers 2013. Contextually this period coincides with the Russian administration's orientations on the accelerated development of social sphere and a raise of well-being level of the Russian citizens, reduction of disproportions in living conditions of different groups of the population. Observation periods were delineated, throughout which content analysis of carpet-selected data from certain printed media and TV programs in St. Petersburg and Stockholm was performed (February 25-March 3; March 18-24; April 08-14;

May 13-19, 2013). The following regional media submitted the sample of texts and videos for the survey: Newspapers - Sankt-Peterburgskiye vedomosty; Vecherniy Peterburg; Moy rayon - St. Petersburg, Centre; TV-channels - Rossia-SPb: "Vesti" and "Civil Society" programs; 100 TV: "Latest News" and "Reflection of the Day" programs; NTV-SPb: "Today in St. Petersburg" program; Fifth Channel: "Open Studio" program. Content analyses were based on the list of 30 topics and coding form. In total 615 TV news reports, 77 analytical TV excerpts, 816 newspaper publications have been analyzed in Russia and 313 TV excerpts and 531 paper publications in Sweden. In-depth interviews with 9 experts – media executives, journalists, media analysts and city level deputies from Russia and Sweden were conducted. 4 homogeneous focus groups were formed, based on educational level, social status, age, gender, ethnic background: Higher education, migrants, secondary education, underprivileged. Focus groups were organized and the discussions were held with the help of Regional Press Institute in St. Petersburg. All the results were recorded on at least to 2 dictaphones, total decoded materials is about 500 pages. Swedish researchers conducted the same study in Stockholm, but their results and comparative data are not presented in this article.

Content analyses of social inequality issues in media revealed quite an ambiguous situation. On the one hand, there is no doubt that the regional media covers (though not often) the issues of everyday life of people with different material and property status, including representatives of socially vulnerable groups. In the totality of subjects covered (it exceeds the aggregate amount of publications) during the research period there are homeless issues (0.5% on TV and 0.1% in newspaper publications) and elderly people issues (0.9 and 1.4 accordingly), sometimes their difficult financial position is mentioned. At the same time properly stratification (inequality) is not among priorities in media content (0.2 and 2.1). Such a level of attention does not correspond with the painful attitude to the problem which was fixed by the public opinion surveys. To compare: Rather neutral in the aspect of financial divides topics of traffic, civil activities or legislation are covered quite more intensely (3.4/3.6; 3.7/4.2; 3.5/3.1). Discourse approaches spectrum should be identified as narrow, and does not contribute public discussions concerning the essence of social problem. Mostly material divides are covered through several discourses: Social policies aimed at elimination of material divides (efforts by the authorities, better laws, and social security), information on individual solutions for financial problems (success stories, charities), and mass media as the helpline for the underprivileged (media campaigns, positive effect of media coverage). While measuring with the conflict scale it turns out that a conflict (mostly positively overcome) is mentioned only in 11.5% of TV news reports and in 1.4% newspaper publications.

The content analyses of ethnic divides coverage gives similar results. The everyday life of refugees and migrants can be defined as a separate thematic segment, but media give negligible attention to such topics (0.1 and 0.2), which is, of course, a violent contrast with the real anxiety of the citizens about the large number of newcomers in the region. At the same time the first glance impression on the ethnic divides media coverage seems to be

quite satisfactory (1.3 and 1.8). However, this impression should be corrected as it is important to take into account, that there are rather mixed issues in this segment; it includes information about cultural exchange between nations, interfaith contacts, etc., means not only about the everyday coexistence of migrants and Petersburg citizens. Some conflicts based on social-ethnical relations (historical episodes included) were mentioned in 2.6% TV news reports and in 3.4% newspaper publications.

Material and ethnic divides issues correlations reveal themselves in different ways. Material inequalities are mostly connected in media with vulnerable social groups (elderly people, homeless persons, as well as migrants); they are treated in the context of social problems (family, labor, living conditions, and consumer issues); they are also close to such topics as legislation, crime, culture and economic divides in society in general (Table 1).

Ethnical divides coverage seems to be focus on itself, separately from the other topics; the issues have few correlations, quite ambivalent ones (crime on TV and culture in paper publications). This means that media tend to react on the events connected with the problem but present them in "us – they" discourse either positive or negative one (Table 2).

Thus media either escape to cover material and ethnic divides or regard them beyond the social context where constructive work with the current problems is possible.

The audience representatives define such media tactics as inadequate to the real situation and consider it to be not in the public needs. Focus groups materials give opportunity to judge

Table 1: Material divides and material conditions issues: Topics correlations

Topics	Russian TV news All excerpts– 31 (n/%)	Russian papers All excerpts – 62 (n/%)
Labor market issues	7/23	2/3
Refugee and immigrants issues	5/16	2/3
Homeless persons situations	5/16	1/2
Elderly people issues	5/16	11/18
Economic divides in society	3/10	24/39
Consumer issues	1/3	17/27
Living conditions	7/23	15/24
Crime, accident	5/16	2/3
Legislation	7/10	15/24
Child and family issues	7/23	1/2
Culture	5/16	4/6

Table 2: Ethnical divides issues correlations

Topics	Russian TV news All excerpts – 49 (n/%)	Russian papers All excerpts – 109 (n/%)
Legislation	8/16	2/2
Culture	1/2	46/42
Relations between different ethnic groups	14/29	21/19
Refugee and immigrants issues	21/43	9/8
Crime, accident	22/45	5/5
City planning, infrastructure	9/18	15/14

about the citizens' mood. There is no opportunity to present in the article a broad picture of views and positions, but it is possible to quote some very typical comments. That's what the under privelidged group members say, for example:

"They show an event. But very little is said about why, and how to deal with it."

"They write that every year more than four thousand homeless people die in the streets of St. Petersburg. And nothing on what has been done."

Especially negative evaluations concern ethnic inequalities coverage, besides sharp criticism comes not only from the participants of the Migrants focus group.

"I have never seen in the newspapers any praise of the Caucasians, of how great they are. Almost all of it is negative: If an old woman were murdered by a Russian, they would only give an overview, if by a Caucasian, it would be enlarged upon. I doubt we would ever see a balanced approach."

"We get bits and pieces of information, and only in relation to some sort of a conflict. Then, all of a sudden, a head of a Diaspora speaks up, trying to do something. What work is done with the migrants, where are they educated? Nobody tells us about it."

"When immigrants are concerned, they concentrate on their difference from the locals, rather than on any common features. They speak about the problems the migrants cause, cover the offences they commit."

Some experts, including journalists also tend to think that social inequality facts need not to be concealing but to discover in fierce debates.

"We have to speak more about inequality, to recognize the problem. The solution depends on the government; it has to be taken by the authorities – the taxes, for example. The society, too, can contribute, through charities, volunteers, through the wealthy people recognizing that they can and should notice the underprivileged and help them. If there is more of that in mass media, the situation will improve."

"I think that the media does not pay enough attention to ethnic hatred crimes. There are more and more of those, and they are hardly ever covered."

At the same time some journalists complain that social divides issues have allegedly poor ways of expression and more – there is no demand for such topics from the audience: "Common people, underprivileged people cannot be featured in mass media. Even if we give them the floor, they often have nothing to say, apart from we are underprivileged."

"The TV audience wanted to see either their own likenesses or something they didn't know about. Still, they do not want to see anything repugnant or distasteful that will upset them."

"People who have somehow resolved their financial problems have absolutely no idea how the underprivileged live and how they resolve their problems. But the worst thing is not the divide, but the tragic lack of understanding of the lives of the underprivileged. It leads to major problems."

At last, it is dangerous to touch some sensitive aspects of life:

"It is hard to work in this domain… Roscomnadzor (State Control Organization in media sphere) immediately issued a warning about stirring up ethnic hatred. Just for mentioning the fact that the locals are concerned by immigration."

"There is a position - no need to focus on this."

As a result there is an evident dissonance in voices in the media, editorial sidelines and everyday communication of citizens. One of the experts described this situation in exact words:

"People who have somehow resolved their financial problems have absolutely no idea how the underprivileged live and how they resolve their problems. But the worst thing is not the divide, but the tragic lack of understanding of the lives of the underprivileged. It leads to major problems."

4. CONCLUSIONS

We can state that mass media publications tend not to voice the painful social distances in the society in Russia. Material inequalities being evaluated as unjust ones both by the audience and experts, which coincides with numerous surveys though the last 10 years, are covered through positive discourses; mass media tend to feature specific human interest stories, lacking systematic and deep approach to the problem. There are penetrations of material divides issues in some relative topics but media evidently escape of conflicts escalation. It can be regarded as conflict prevention tactics, as according to Bolz "social comparisons cultivate envy and tend to expectations explosion" (Bolz, 2009). But the practice is far from the society expectations as it does not reflect the real scale of the problem. Quite similar but not the same situation is with the ethic divides coverage. Evidently ethnic relations and divides can be defined as highly explosive issues in the society; their discussion by various social groups tends to provoke conflicts therein. Being unaware of the methods of safety coverage media escape of mentioning them except urgent grounds. Within the observation period, mass media refrained from touching on these issues without a significant news peg; ethnic background of featured conflicts was hushed down. Primary pegs for coverage of these issues became criminal episodes, actions by newsmakers from various agencies of power, social problems related to the immigrants. Material and ethnic divides are covered in media on the different levels. Material gaps are treated as inequalities, mostly unjust ones, which can be defined as the main discourse of publications. As for ethnic gaps excerpts discourse it can be defined as "discourse of differences" which corresponds to the "we – us" attitude to immigrants in society. Being slightly and not systematically articulated in media in connection with certain events and social groups material and ethnical diversities turn to

become real gaps which are impossible to overcome both in mind and reality.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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