

Political Opposition and Xenophobia in Russian Region: An Attempt of Fuzzy Analysis

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Abstract

The article provides an analysis of data on the current state of xenophobia and political opposition in one of the Russian regions. Aim: the main goal is to identify and analyze the hidden laws of functioning of the social and political sphere in modern Russia. Method: method of fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis was used for the study, because the traditional quantitative methods do not always allow to detect and obtain reliable information. The article explains the use of the appropriate method in the analysis of social and political phenomena and processes. Results: The main part of the paper contains the results of the analysis of empirical sociological research conducted in the Pskov region in Russian Federation (2013). The study revealed the complex relationship between the treatment of the political opposition and the xenophobic members of certain groups, which are considered "foes". The obtained results show that the support of political opposition among Pskov Region respondents is in many ways determined by the level of their xenophobia. In particular, it failed to identify that the support of administrative bans in relation to different groups is a typical feature of the declared support of political opposition in Pskov Region. Conclusion: residents of the provincial regions of modern Russia have special understanding of the political opposition, based on different from the classical liberal idea. The revealed characteristics are also accompanied by the support of administrative bans as legal mechanisms preventing the spread of the factors that break the traditional way of life and are regarded as extraneous phenomena.

Keywords: political sociology, fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis, xenophobia, Russia, political opposition.

1. Introduction

One of the key issues relevant to social studies of the society's political functioning lies in identifying objective factors of transformation of the political space formed with the help of democratic structures. From a practical point of view, the most interesting challenge is to analyse the dynamics of political support among the population expressed through the fundamental right to elect public authorities.

Contemporary social research into voting behaviour and voting support was pioneered by Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, who came up with the theory of social cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan, 1990). Without going into details of this concept, which has already become classical, or debates over its applicability to the analysis of party systems in various states (post-communist ones, in the first place), we will point out a number of postulates which can be accepted and operationalised for modelling of political support dynamics in modern Russia.

Social cleavage is by default regarded as some fundamental structural difference between social groups based on given grounds which has been formed for many years by some "critical juncture" or a conflict which revealed the gist of the cleavage. At the modern stage of society, social cleavage acts as a non-antagonistic difference, and, as suggested by several researchers, "social division can be based on both objective social characteristics and the system of values" (Akhremenko, 2007). The need to take into account the system of values is of particular importance for us.

Another crucial point for Russian political space is a new development in the cleavage theory which recognizes the special role of political elites in creating the cleavage. In particular, Giovanni Sartori maintains that political elites can provoke or impede some social contradictions depending on their own goals and benefit (Sartori, 1990). Therefore, it seems reasonable to structure political space with regard to the current government and look at divisions related to

support of / opposition to the ruling government. Here it is important for us to estimate possible impact of the government and opposition on social characteristics of separate population groups.

Research objective is the typical social portraits identification of representatives of opposition and pro-imperious political views in the context of their attitude towards representatives of ethnic, cultural and social communities, which are not prepotent for the studied region.

2. Structure of Political Preferences Analysis

In fact, when determining their political preferences, social groups are guided by expectations of changes in their consumption level in a broad sense. Their view of target consumption level and of possibility to reach this level through their own impact on political institutes is affected by factors characterising the current position of their group in the social structure of society. It should be noted that measurement of the consumption level and evaluation of expectations from changes cannot be linearly identified only by the level of wealth and expectation of its growth as a result of citizens expressing their will through elections. Voting behaviour of social groups is based on their desire to increase the quality of life and get more access to resources in their region as well as to extend the field in order to satisfy their material and spiritual needs.

Contemporary political sociology embraces a considerable number of research papers focusing on classification and structure of factors which determine the voters' choice. These factors traditionally include the level of income, position in terms of professional qualifications and settlement structure, sociodemographic characteristics and the level of education. For some countries importance is also attached to the faith, participation in trade unions, linguistic and cultural characteristics (Norris, 2004) etc.

Measures used in such analysis usually include only those measures that are either subject to explicit quantitative measurements or are represented by quantitative variables through developed and valid methods. Key methods include traditional correlation, regression and factor analyses.

Traditional quantitative methods are limited in terms of including such characteristics as the system of values. There are also problems with formalization of expert judgments on such issues as characteristics of the political process in those national regions where political support of the current government is mostly determined by mobilisation capacities of local political elites and specifics of the region's social structure.

Special mention is to be made of the evaluation of impact produced by mass media and Internet on political support dynamics. Although experts acknowledge the importance of this factor, we can rarely see any convincing explanatory models based on comprehensive measurements of respective processes, which clearly shows that traditional tools of analysis are insufficient. Usually we see no more than just acknowledgment of an important role played by mass media in the dynamics of political support, especially during electoral campaigns.

Talking about Russia, we cannot ignore the significance of stability as a crucial determinant of political support patterns. Lack of radical changes in the structure of power combined with the growth of economic wealth makes a relevant part of the political rhetoric of pro-government elites. Stability is opposed to the threat of repeated turbulence of the recent past as well as replay of dramatic scenarios of the neighbouring countries. This means that the guarantees of political, social, economic and now even moral and spiritual stability are dominant in the communication code of the current Russian government and act as a key reason for its support by the people.

The above examples cannot be regarded as exhaustive and should be viewed in the light of numerous factors determining the voting behavior and complexity of its measurements. If such factors are ignored, this can lead to poor formal characteristics of the models and their diminished explanatory value.

One of the ways to overcome limitations typical of quantitative methods in the study of the voting process is to apply fuzzy mathematics. The branch of mathematics related to fuzzy information is known as fuzzy set theory or fuzzy logic. It serves as a theoretical basis to build voting behavior models that would take into account such hard to formalize and fuzzy factors as the system of values, cultural attitudes and the level of political consciousness. On the one hand, traditional methods of model building do not bring satisfactory results when the basic description of the problem under study is done in an incomplete or imprecise way; on the other hand, getting exhaustive information to build a precise mathematical model for a more or less complex real situation can be infeasible. Over the last decade, we have seen a large number of different models based on fuzzy mathematics appear in such areas as management of technical, organisational systems, economic and social processes.

All sciences deals not with reality but with models of reality. Modern science rests on the foundation of classical mathematics based on crisp set theory. During a long time in most scientific spheres, classical, crisp-set-based mathematics serves as adequate modeling language, allows successfully constructing models well realistic and precise.

But when we take a closer look, what we see is that successes isn't so obvious in the realm of "soft" sciences, such as economics, sociology, political science, philosophy, psychology and, more generally, sciences in which human judgment, perceptions and emotions play an important role. The reason is the inadequacy of crisp-set-based mathematics as a modeling language in such sciences.

One way to overcome this problem is the use of fuzzy mathematics based on fuzzy set theory. Since a crisp set from this point of view is a special case of a fuzzy set, fuzzy mathematics is substantially more general than crisp-set-based mathematics. The high relevance of fuzzy mathematics to "soft" sciences is directly related to its high power as a modeling language, based on adequate reflection of human nature. There is a very large number of phenomena that involve an altogether different kind of uncertainty, uncertainty related to ambiguity and vagueness concerning the degree to which an observation demonstrates the qualities of a concept. Crisp set theory is not well suited to dealing with such uncertainty. In contrast to crisp set theory, which views observations in either-or terms, fuzzy set theory assumes many observables are only partially included in a set. Fuzzy sets theory proposes to deal with unclear boundaries, representing vague concepts and working with linguistic variables. In this sense, fuzzy sets emerged as an alternative way to deal with uncertainties, necessarily present in human activities.

Formal models in comparative sociology and politics treat actors' preferences, judgments as observables from which they attempt to predict outcomes. In contrast to the crisp approach, the fuzzy approach requires that consideration be given to methods for collecting and aggregating individual preferences necessarily taking into account the principle fatal ambiguity of expression.

There are a number of reasons why scholars might be better advised to analyze preferences, judgments in fuzzy rather than crisp terms (Clark, Larson, Mordeson, Potter, Wierman, 2008). Actors are often faced with the problem of lack of information, resulting in uncertainty. Besides, they have to deal with various indistinguishable options, lying in the middle. Moreover, the issues can cause discussions on different dimensions.

Of course, along with the benefits, the use of fuzzy mathematics in sociological and political studies brings some difficulties: in accordance with the new methodology is necessary to modify the methods of collecting and analyzing information. Besides the use of new methods and interpretation of the results are not as clear as before. Nevertheless, the use of methods of fuzzy mathematics in the such sciences as sociology and political studies has promising prospects.

The method of fuzzy mathematics which is especially interesting for social research is fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) suggested by Charles C. Ragin (Ragin, 2008). Developed out of the qualitative comparative analysis (Ragin, 2000), this method allows to use fuzzy description of factors measured in different scales.

For fsQCA to be applied, input data (study subjects and their respective variables) must be transformed into fuzzy sets so that each subject is assigned a degree of membership in some crisp set. To do this, input values are calibrated based on expert's judgment or analytical (theoretical) procedure. Thus, calibration (transformation) of input variables produces new variables containing information about each subject's degree of membership in a given set. In this way information about subjects which is intrinsically fuzzy (vague, with different ways of interpretation) and is expressed through various indices, is transformed into the language of participation functions and, hence, acquires strict mathematical determination.

The main goal of such method is to establish a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the phenomenon under study, i.e. cause-effect argumentation. In the fuzzy set theory, this is achieved through checking whether the degree of subject's participation in one set is higher than in the other. We believe that this method of representing complex factors and analysis of cause-and-effect relations is the most appropriate for our study.

In our case, the target measure is the level of political support of political parties, namely United Russia, among the population. The study objective to be reached through fsQCA is finding a set of cultural, value and institutional factors which are necessary and sufficient conditions of a high level of political support.

Fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis is a unique approach to data analysis which allows to work with small samplings when statistical methods are ineffective, to detect patterns in the form of sets of values, to provide various causal explanations for the same phenomenon and to build so-called causal typologies. Problems that such method naturally involves (e.g. the problem of dealing with a large number of variables or representing patterns as rather long expressions) are not an insurmountable barrier to its application in social studies.

3. Pskov Region: Political Opposition and Xenophobia

In order to demonstrate the efficacy of the fsQCA method in studying complex processes and evaluating fuzzy social and political phenomena, we have analysed the factors that determine attitude towards opposition in contemporary Russian regions. Pskov Region was chosen as a subject of the study.

So as to have general understanding of the region's characteristics, first we need to consider its main statistical indicators which can be significant for the range of issues involved in the study.

According to the estimates (Federal Service of State Statistics, 2014) dated 1 January 2014, Pskov Region population amounts to 656,600 people. Out of them, 70.2% form urban population. Besides, there are no large cities in the region. The region's capital of Pskov has 206,700 residents. Today, there are only 3 towns (besides the region's centre) with population over 12,000 residents, the threshold value for a settlement to be considered a town. Russians (95%) and other Slavic peoples (2.3%) dominate in the ethnical structure of the population. The share of Gypsy population is relatively high if compared with other regions (0.5% versus the Russian average of 0.15%).

Demographic dynamics is characterised by a negative rate of natural increase (the region is among the last in Russia by this indicator), low migration, with slightly negative internal migration balance and slightly positive international migration balance.

The share of gross regional product in the economic indicators all over Russia amounts to 0.2%, which is quite a low rate in comparison with other regions and the lowest one in the Northwestern Federal District. The main industries include wholesale and retail trading, repair of motor vehicles, motorcycles, household appliances, manufacturing, transportation, and communications. Most of exported goods (88.1%) are delivered to CIS countries. Up to 92% of imported goods are supplied from the countries outside the CIS.

Average per capita income is low. The region is the last in the federal district by this indicator. Welfare benefits account for 27.5% of population income; this figure is much higher than the average rate in Russia, demonstrating a high level of residents' dependency on the state.

The average annual number of retirees is 210,000 people, which creates a rather high retirement burden considering the average annual number of the employed, which is equal to 325,900 people.

Consumer price index is at the level of the Russian average; besides, the cost of the fixed basket of consumer goods amounts to 94% of the average Russian value.

Based on such an overview of the social and economic situation, we can conclude that Pskov Region falls into the category of so-called "depressed areas" with low living standards of the population in comparison with the country's average. When analysing this topic, we should consider the location of Pskov Region: it is rather close to Russian capitals, namely, Moscow and Saint Petersburg, as well as to such EU countries as Estonia and Latvia. It means that active population can relatively easily, if compared with peripheral Russian regions, leave the region, generating an understanding of the living standards in economically developed Russian cities, of the European comfort and developed urban environment.

The electoral landscape of Pskov Region has been characterised by increased support of socially-oriented parties such as the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and A Just Russia over the two recent State Duma electoral cycles. Besides, the support of these parties continues to increase. Although United Russia, the ruling political party, permanently takes the leading position in the region, it is not so well ahead of its competitors as in other regions. The region is in the first quartile of party's support distribution among the regions.

The results of our analysis that are set out in this article are based on the study called "Ideological Consciousness of Pskov Region Population" carried out by the Institute for Regional Development (www.regdevelopment.ru) (state non-profit R&D organization under Pskov Region administration) in 2013; the statistical population involves residents of all the districts of the region, with the sample of 3,500 people. Pskov Region population's attitude towards political opposition was studied in August 2013 by means of a standardised interview of respondents in their communities; quotas were set for gender and age. The majority of questions in the questionnaire are single-answer close-ended questions in an ordinal scale.

There are several sections in the questionnaire. The first section contains questions which served to evaluate people's attitude towards federal and regional authorities, political opposition in general, and political parties and some individual politicians. The second section contained questions aiming to assess residents' xenophobia in Pskov Region, i.e. intolerance towards migrants, people of other nationalities and religions. Another section contains questions intended to assess people's level of religiosity and involvement in religious practices.

The report on this study has been published on the website of the Institute (Institute of Regional Development, 2013); the study itself showed that declared support of political opposition in the region was 28.2% on average. Among those who opt for "support at the elections" of some political party, one in five (21.1%) acknowledges their support of opposition. Besides, more than a half of respondents who declared themselves as "oppositionists" stated that they were ready to vote for the pro-government United Russia. Furthermore, xenophobia level among respondents who consider themselves "oppositionists" is slightly higher than the regional average, especially towards people who violate "moral standards". These conclusions actually contradict the traditional understanding of "opposition" and therefore underlie our

study: the main question was about the types of xenophobia that are sufficient conditions for a high level of declared support of political opposition.

The general level of xenophobia was measured as follows: respondents were asked to use the six-level scale in order to assess their tolerance/intolerance towards the groups of population which are the most numerous or are subject to negative social perception, and form minority in the region because of their nationality, social status, or other characteristics. In total, twelve of such groups were included in the questionnaire on the basis of the pilot study results; capital residents, Tatars, countryside residents, opposition activists, Caucasians, Gypsies, Uzbeks, gays, guest workers, alcohol addicts, nationalists, and Muslims.

4. fsQCA Analysis of Political Opposition Support

First of all, we carried out factor analysis by extracting principal components using Varimax rotation with Kaiser's normalisation in order to define the optimal set of features for fsQCA analysis. IBM SPSS Statistics 21 software was used as a tool.

When analysis by default was applied and the factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted, the solution included two factors uniting initial variables related to different contexts. The total explained dispersion amounted to 58.8%. We consider such solution unsatisfactory in terms of the adequacy of possible interpretation and the possibility to further use the results.

The same method was used in order to calculate solutions with forced extraction of three to four factors. We believe that the solution with three factors is the most acceptable one: it fits common sense and our understanding of the subject as well as is easy to interpret. The total explained dispersion for such solution is 65.7%.

- Factor 1: intolerance towards Tatars, Caucasians, Gypsies, Uzbeks, Muslims and guest workers.
- Factor 2: intolerance towards gays, alcohol addicts and nationalists.
- Factor 3: intolerance towards capital and countryside residents.

The first factor may be interpreted as ethnic and national xenophobia. Besides, we consciously agree with some researchers on the definition of national xenophobia as "a feature of mass consciousness that is largely spontaneous in nature, even in cases when it develops under the influence of coordinated propaganda efforts" (Pain, 2007) and of nationalism as the system of concept-based ideas.

Apart from representatives of other nationalities explicitly included in the questionnaire, such categories as guest workers and Muslims are also added to the first factor. This does not contradict the ethnical interpretation of this factor, since, according to an existing stereotype, guest workers imply not all those who work outside the region of their residence, but rather citizens of the Soviet Central Asia republics, mainly Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In the mass consciousness, the notion of a guest worker does not usually include labour force from former USSR republics with mostly Slavic population, as well as from other Russian regions. Likewise, the category of Muslims does not characterise Islam adherents, but rather the ethnicity for which Islam is a traditional religion. In the context of Pskov Region, a Muslim is, first of all, a representative of a non-native ethnos implementing non-traditional cultural practices; it means that the category marker used in the questionnaire is mainly related to the ethnical and cultural component of the image of the marked population group.

Based on the results of factor analysis, the first factor included opposition activists. This category does not fit the general logic of the first factor as interpreted above. Moreover, if we use the solution with four factors instead of three, this category would form a separate factor and involve only the one category mentioned above. Considering the peculiarities of variables grouping and the fact that the dependent variable selected for the analysis is conceptually close to "opposition activists", we find it possible and reasonable to exclude the "opposition activists" category from the variables of the first factor. However, its initial presence may imply a significant correlation between respondents' attitude towards ethnic groups and opposition activists.

The second factor unites categories that can be characterised as xenophobia based on deviation from socially approved standards and practices. The "gays" category involves not only homosexuals, but also other representatives of the LGBT community who openly declare their belonging to this community, share its values, and demonstrate the models of social interaction adopted by it. The "alcohol addicts" category is characterised not by standard medical parameters, but by social maladjustment caused by alcohol abuse. In this study, "nationalists" should not be regarded as people who adhere to and practice corresponding political and ideological views within the legal framework; they should include those who show hostility towards other nationalities in everyday interactions and use different means and practices including criminal actions.

The third factor includes categories selected according to the place of residence. It involves people from different

levels of settlement hierarchy, namely capital and countryside residents.

It is obvious that the variables characterising xenophobia and respondents' attitude towards political opposition are more qualitative in nature, which justifies our use of fuzzy set method and fuzzy logic. The relation between xenophobia and political opposition declared by respondents was further analysed based on Fuzzy Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (Ragin C.C., 2008) using fsQCA 2.5 (Ragin & Davey, 2014). After the skipped answers were removed, the sample to be analysed included 2,213 cases.

The level of generalised declared support of political opposition served as the target variable. The support level is evaluated in the questionnaire by a direct question about the respondent's attitude towards political opposition (a five-level ordinal scale of statements). Conditions include the levels of xenophobia towards other nationalities, visitors from other regions and violators of social standards. In order to evaluate the level of xenophobia, two sections were formed from the answers to the question about the relations that the respondent could accept with other people (six-level ordinal scale): with answers related to people of other nationalities (Tatars, Caucasians, Uzbeks, Gypsies) in the first section and to residents of the capital and rural areas in the second.

The level of support of administrative measures restricting the freedom of movement and residence was also regarded as the expression of xenophobia. Two variables were formed from the question about who the respondent would prohibit from showing up in their city/settlement: one containing all the twelve answers to this question and the other containing only those related to "violators of social standards" (alcohol addicts, prostitutes, drug addicts and gays).

Xenophobia levels for each respondent were measured as arithmetic means of input empirical indicators. For fsQCA to be applied, the obtained variables of the target characteristic and conditions were calibrated: thresholds were set based on substantive concepts of the level of expression of each characteristic. Thus, low level of xenophobia based on national and territorial grounds and high level of support of administrative bans in general and in relation to "violators of social standards" were regarded as conditions.

For minimisation, the rows with less than 1% of observations were omitted from the truth table, which means the coverage of more than 90% of observations. Regrettably, the level of the truth table row consistency was not very high, which is why we had to use the consistency threshold of 0.7.

Using such parameters, we analysed different combinations of sufficient conditions for the high level of declared support of political opposition. As it turned out, if only xenophobia based on national and territorial grounds was considered as a condition, all the truth table rows would have too low row consistency (less than 0.7), which means that the solution is not well-grounded. Moreover, we failed to detect the influence of a negative attitude towards "violators of social standards": this variable was not included in the final solution in any of the considered combinations. For that reason, the following was regarded as sufficient conditions: low level of xenophobia based on national and territorial grounds, high general support of administrative measures restricting the freedom of movement and residence. In this case the intermediate solution (the same as the complex solution) includes two options:

1. High level of support of administrative bans with a level of national and territorial xenophobia which is not low.
2. High level of support of administrative bans with a low level of both national and territorial xenophobia.

The consistency of this solution is 0.74, with the coverage of 0.23. If consistency threshold is increased up to 0.75, this leads to a final solution consisting of only the second option with the consistency of 0.78 and the coverage of 0.13. If we take low level of declared support of political opposition as the resulting characteristic, the considered xenophobia variables do not give a solution with the least acceptable consistency level (more than 0.7).

The obtained results show that the support of political opposition (at least the level of declared attitude) among Pskov Region respondents is in many ways determined by the level of their xenophobia. Sufficient conditions of the high support of political opposition include combination of a high level of all the kinds of xenophobia or high support of administrative measures and a level of xenophobia based on national and territorial grounds which is not high. The above-mentioned study (Institute of Regional Development, 2013) shows that the level of xenophobia evaluated by the support of administrative bans among oppositionists is always a little higher than the average in the region. One can say that such expression of xenophobia is a necessary condition of the declared opposition. FsQCA-based analysis showed that a high level of support of administrative bans is present in both combinations of sufficient conditions. All of this suggests that the support of administrative bans in relation to different groups is a typical feature (a necessary and sufficient condition) of the declared support of political opposition in Pskov Region.

However, this hypothesis requires a more in-depth study. The analysed social research does not allow us to evaluate the expression of xenophobia in more detail. Insufficiently high consistency and coverage may not only result from poorly detailed xenophobia indicators, but also from a lack of unique interpretation of "political opposition" among respondents. A classical understanding of political opposition in Russia, which evolved during perestroika and is dominant in the protest political discourse of large cities, stems from the Western concept, involving a set of liberal values

and ideas of equality, including cultural and national tolerance. Since there is no uniform access to information sources for different opposition forces, the public at large may get the wrong impression that today's opposition in Russia is mostly liberally-oriented. The revealed attitude of the dwellers of this remote region towards political opposition shows a rather contradictory understanding of the dogmatic interpretation of the concept stated in the works of Robert Dahl and requires in-depth interpretation at the level of state and regional policy in the context of Russia's "depressed area".

Currently Russian regions with a low level of socio-economic development and poor resources and infrastructure (Pskov Region being undoubtedly one of them) are characterised by a high level of state paternalism acceptance. Paternalism is characterised by a high level of control exercised by authorities over citizens in exchange for acceptable consumption level (both material and spiritual one). Due to a constant lack of resources, people favour their distribution among "friends" and, therefore, deny equal state support for so-called "foes", the groups of population that form a disapproved minority based on national, social, territorial or other grounds. Such attitudes are translated into the political field and are institutionally expressed through the voting support of parties and associations in opposition to the ruling party, although not the ones that are liberally-oriented, but the ones that are rather socially oriented, on the one hand, and proclaim the policy of power, on the other.

5. Conclusion

We can conclude from the results of our analysis that an average Pskov Region resident does not associate political opposition with its immanent features but rather regards it as a way of rejecting everything that does not fit in their ordinary worldview. This gives rise to xenophobia as non-acceptance of some social groups in which we have included temporarily employed residents of Soviet Central Asia as well as sexual minorities, prostitutes and rural dwellers. The revealed characteristics are also accompanied by the support of administrative bans as legal mechanisms preventing the spread of the factors that break the traditional way of life and are regarded as extraneous phenomena.

Certainly, this analysis does not claim to be exhaustive; it rather constitutes one of the first efforts to analyse the attitude of a contemporary Russian province towards political opposition. The application of fsQCA in this area is very promising, allowing to include numerous qualitative factors in the analysis. However, successful application of fsQCA largely depends on the adequacy of empirical indicators. The analysis showed that in order to enable an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon, it is necessary not only to give a more precise definition of such terms as "political opposition" and "xenophobia", but also to develop new empirical tools to measure these concepts that are oriented towards the application of fuzzy mathematics.

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