

## Communicative Element in the Activities of Russian Political Parties: Past and Present

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**Abstract:** The article presents a comparative analysis of the communicative element in the activities of Russian political parties in the beginning of the XX century and up to the present day. The methodological basis for the conceptual comparison is the similarity of objectives that the state and society face in the historical moments of radical changes of political systems. The epistemological toolkit is the conceptual construct of modern political science, modern research of the American, European and Russian researchers. The empirical base of the study is, respectively: the activities of the most influential political organizations of Russia at the beginning of the last century – the Constitutional Democratic Party (Party of People’s Freedom) and the leading party of modern Russia - the “United Russia”. The purpose of the article is to show the increasing importance of political communication in the changing world. The applied relevance of the article is justified by the new challenges that the contemporary Russian politics faces now. The analysis brings about the following conclusions: 1) communication is the most important strategy of the party organization; 2) a political party, irrespective of whether it is the opposition or the ruling party, should pursue a responsible policy based on constant interaction with the society and 3) in the absence of such communication, the party, despite a temporary electoral success, can expect a political defeat in the future. The theoretical conclusions are focused on the empirical explanation of strategies of modern political parties to predict their electoral prospects.

**Key words:** Political parties • Political communication • Comparative historical and political analysis  
• Political process • Contemporary Russian politics

### INTRODUCTION

Presently, a lot of book and magazine publications devoted to political communication cover various aspects of interaction between citizens and the state in the changing world [1, 2, 3]. The following terms appear among the definitions of “political communication”: “power of information”, “production and exchange of information”, “presentation and interpretation of information” and others [4]. The concept of “political communication” in modern Russian political science is usually interpreted as a set of methods and forms of political information exchange [5, p. 101]. Political communication is also seen “as a semantic aspect of the interaction of political subjects through the exchange of information in the struggle for power or its exercise” [5, p. 75]. Of course, the exchange of information is an

essential element of the political process. However, in our view, it is incorrect to explain the whole political communication by this single point. Particularly clearly the limitations of this definition are shown in the process of party building and party activities. Political communication often appears here in its extra-informational form. The struggle for electoral sympathies is not always spread among all levels of the population and it is limited to a small number of supporters, but what is broadcast outside can hardly be called the “exchange of information”. We find it appropriate to consider the political communication as a broad process of production, distribution, exchange and consumption of ideological components. Further on, the concept of “political communication” will be interpreted in relation to the activities of political parties in that original context.

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## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study seeks to identify the communicative element in the activities of one of the Russian parties at the beginning of the XX century and compare it with the corresponding element in the most popular modern political organization. The main condition for an adequate comparative historical and political analysis is the formulation of an epistemological matrix that represents the totality of the initial conceptual framework and conceptual construct. Regarding such matrix, we are guided by the above-mentioned definition of the political communication, which allows us to consider this element of the political process in its entirety. The main empirical data in this article is party documents. Based on the ordering of the evidence in the conceptual form, political science understands their political significance [6].

**The Main Part:** Party membership is the most important structural element of modern political life. Analyzing the history of establishment of democratic political systems, political scientists traditionally identify two basic principles of forming parties – the institutional and ideological ones. We believe that both these principles have a common, uniform basis – political communication. It is known that any political party aims to become a winner in the political system: gaining or maintaining power, in other words, every effort is made to turn into a powerful political institution. By the internal structure, it should be a stable hierarchical organization consisting of individuals with similar political beliefs. That is exactly why the communication links within the organization come to the fore that are subject to the most important functions – aggregation and articulation of social interests, expression of national goals and objectives [7, 8, 9].

The second aspect in the activities of the parties that is directly related to political communication is the relationship of the party leaders and party members with the masses of those who give them their electoral support, namely with the public, the people, the citizens. It's not by chance that a typical American view of the party emphasizes the communicative aspect. A political party is seen as such a political institution (along with the elections, interest groups and the media), that allows the interconnection between the people and the politicians [10].

The history of party-building in Russia lasts for just over one hundred years. By the beginning of XX century, Russian politics had had no experience of party work. At that moment there was no generally accepted theoretical investigations, describing and explaining the process of party building. According to the justified remark of B.A. Isaev, “the situation of the party theory” was predetermined by the state of the “party practice”. The first Russian experts who have studied the political process in the country did not face the problems of the electoral process, the nomination of candidates, the election campaigns of parties, generally the interaction of parties and the electorate” and they did not have “the experience of interaction with the government parties, the parliamentary struggle [11].

Obviously, the theory that would steer the civil society in practical politics and provide the necessary influence on the process of party building, was supposed to appear only as a result of certain political practices and relevant historical experience. Subsequently, M. Duverger would determine the starting point in the development of the science about parties (as one of the most important parts of political science), by the term “vicious circle”. According to him, the general theory of parties could be established only after serious preliminary studies, but such studies were not “sufficient”, because to this day the postulates and principles of the “general theory” have not yet been formulated [12].

In the works of Russian political scientists, it is generally recognized that the political parties are political associations that express the interests, goals and ideals of particular social groups in the most concentrated form because they themselves consist of the most active members of these groups (political elites), providing political guidance to them in the process of gaining, using or exercising state power in the society. The essential characteristics of political parties are considered their social structure and social base, composition, interests and goals of the party leadership, political strategies of the organization and objective focus of their political actions. The most important criterion of a political party, in particular, is the answer to the question of what interests of which forces it is protecting and conducting in the daily practice of the party and whose views it ultimately expresses.

Very often the attempts to form parties on a supra-class or cross-class basis are assessed by the political scientists as a kind of ideological (technological)

manipulation by the representatives of the various political elites. In the end, it does not matter what “slogans” are used by one party or another. The most important is what purposes it serves and how the declared goals are consistent with the vital needs of the development of the state and society. This thesis can hardly be disputed. Each party, by definition, is only a part (from the Latin *pars* - part) of the whole, that is, society and in this capacity it is following exclusively narrow sectarian political goals.

On the other hand, it is necessary to answer the question of whether the so-called “extra class” parties cannot exist because it’s simply impossible? And it’s impossible “because each class has their own special interests opposing the interests of other classes, therefore, the party which begins to protect all classes at once, would have to simultaneously protect the most contradictory requirements that would be impossible and absurd” [13]. Does this mean that the subjective cannot be identical to the objective and private goals – with statewide and nationwide? Speaking of political communication, we would like to draw attention to the primary meaning of the term “communication” as the mode or form of “binding”. In the case of political communication, this means the transformation of something initially politically fragmented into something organizationally and ideologically united and uniform.

At the beginning of XX century the Constitutional Democratic Party was acting at the Russian political stage in the role of Russian political “integrator”, having taken on the mission of a kind of mediator, aiming to link different associations with each other and with the government. The “classless” and “non-ideological” approaches to politics declared by the founders of the People’s Freedom Party to a large extent affected the very process of its formation. The elements involved in political activities had different frames of mind, which had a common origin: the negation of the existing order and opposition to those in power. There was no uniform “political color”, political or economic doctrine or a single shape-generating social stratum common to all of the merging groups and individuals. The main communicative problem was that they had to create not the one whole “body” but a kind of “system of bodies, united artificially and with unstable balance”, which, as the leader of the party P.N. Milyukov wrote, would be immediately destroyed “as soon as the individual components of the party found their natural centers of gravity” [14, p. 112].

In fact, there was no disruption of the core of the Party, but the collapse of the ideological illusions and pretensions of party leaders to unite divergent political forces with overall national and state interests [15].

In 1917, for a relatively short period of time, the leaders of the Constitutional Democratic Party were at the top of the executive branch, where, apparently, they could have taken full advantage of their high intellectual potential and extensive scientific instruments. However, in this dramatic period of national history the doctrinal statements came in clear contradiction with the practical politics. The Party of People’s Freedom did not become the center of association. Rather, it served as a negative historical lesson, from which the other parties, claiming to perform a cohesive, integrating function in the political life of Russia, could learn [16].

Speaking about the modern Russian political parties, we can see the only party that stands today with the declarations of national and country-wide goals. It states in the Program Address of the party “United Russia” (2011) that this organization “has already proved that” it “is able to act as a national political leader, not just to lead, but to rise above partisan interests”, it hears “not only its supporters, but opponents too”, it follows “the strategic goals, rather than short-term benefits”, works “in the interests of all regions, all social groups and all citizens of our country”. In other words, “in the fullest sense”, the “United Russia” is the “nation-wide and all-Russian party” [17]. Of course, the pre-election nature of such declarations should be born in mind, the validity of which must always be supported by practical politics.

Judging by almost two years that have passed since the election campaign, we can say that examples of unity of the party and civil society become more and more scarce. The main deputies representing the party in the State Duma are shaken by the corruption, property and other reputational scandals. Against the background of a relatively stable central authority of the party, there is a significant reduction of trust to the regional party organizations. Obviously, the most visible example of the weakening of communication links between the “United Russia” and society is the establishment of the “People’s Front For Russia” on the basis of the party – a social movement, that aims to bridge the gap between the party members and all levels of society.

It should be noted that, as in the case of constitutional democrats of the beginning of the XX century that were an opposition party and in the case of

the ruling “United Russia”, an initiative in the field of political communication comes solely from “top authorities”. Large segments of the population remain largely out of politics and, therefore, they can hardly be regarded as equal partners in the “exchange of political information”. The whole situation looks like this: the “United Russia” party and society exist within the rigid boundaries of the subject-object relationship. Due to the one-sidedness of disseminated information and the almost complete lack of feedback, this relationship cannot be considered as communicative.

### CONCLUSIONS

- The political struggle (struggle for power or for the retention of power) is, above all, a conscious form of activity and as such, it is the requirement that each political grouping had a clearly defined strategic direction and also to consciously choose tactics, depending on the strategy.
- Historical reasons for the failure of the Constitutional Democratic Party – the Party of People’s Freedom lie not so much in the ideological field, but in the fundamental inability of the Kadets to find the optimal balance between their own political doctrine and political practice, between the interests of the educated part of the society and masses. Essentially, apart from declarations, they didn’t manage to establish general civil communication. Especially significant is that when the Kadets came to power in 1917, their “centrism” (a combination of appeals to the “hard power” with utopian social slogans) began suffering one political defeat after another.
- This political lesson applies to any modern party organizations that either exercise governmental functions, or aspire to achieve them. A political party must not only set realistic, achievable goals and use appropriate means to implement them, either based on the existing legal framework, or preparing an adequate legal basis for further action, but also involve the widest strata of the public in political activities. Otherwise, the political struggle for these layers will inevitably intensify, which may approach the boundaries of the legal space or even go well beyond them.
- Communication, that is, constant interaction of professional politicians with the society, is a major political goal of the party organization; a political

party must pursue responsible policies, regardless of whether it is an opposition or a ruling party. In the absence of such communication, or its lack, a party, even despite a temporary electoral success, can expect a political defeat in the future.

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