

HISTORY

RUSSIAN POLITICAL SALON AS THE LOCAL NETWORK

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The paper discusses the phenomenon of patron-client relationship and social exchange in Russian political salons at the end of XIX and the beginning of XX centuries. M. Leonov argues that the salons functioned as an exchange network where actors were connected by a broker. For several decades this social mechanism has been used as a communication channel between the civil society and the state power.

This is as an attempt to clarify the friendly links of Russian bureaucracy elite at the boundary of XIX-XX centuries as well as to study the political salons of Prince V.P. Meschersky, general E.V. Bogdanovich and Dr. P.A. Badmaev, which appear to be considered as the contact venues for the government officials and the active society members.

Russian state regulated the professional duties of the officials but did not interfere with their privacy. Attending the salons, exchanging private correspondence, having meals within close friends - all of that is leisure. At the same time, people from high society could seriously influence the official matters. The host was especially interested in prominent guests. The top officials such as Ivan Vyshnegradsky or Sergey Witte served as an enticement for the lower-rank visitors - governors, for example. Their presence at the meetings, even short-time, proved to be not only the confirmation of their personal links with the broker, but also as a signal for the surrounding guests: the ministers show their respect towards the circle, that means, it possesses real power and authority.

The pragmatic approach mostly defined the atmosphere of the salon meetings as well the behavior of the visitors. The demonstration of loyalty was the guarantee of fruitful cooperation, and in this connection the conservative direction of the salon community was especially meaningful. It was stated that the members of the community share the basic values and interests of the conservatives and are ready to contribute to the achievement of common aims. Such a unity upon the ideological foundation was especially visible during the parties when

the members underlined their solidarity by joint praying, meals and giving patriotic speeches.

Different visitors from various social groups took part in political disputes, and their membership was regularly renewed. The salon gathered the representatives of the active society, both from the capital and provincial towns. The authorities did not neglect the voices which sounded at the salon.

The salon itself, as the complex social mechanism, may be studied from different aspects. Our research attracts the main attention towards the intermediary activity of the key person of the salon - its host. The local network at a political salon united the people with different status and to some extent regulated their relationships. They could be divided into two groups: the "patrons" and the "clients". The host usually played the role of the broker. It is difficult to talk about the presence of a well-organized and clear procedure in the interaction between the broker and the "patrons" and "clients" attending the salon: a lot depended on the specific situation. Nevertheless, we may define some stages which appear to be typical for most deals.

The cooperation process began, as a rule, from applying for help. If the broker considered it perspective and found it possible to reassure the client, the communication channel appeared between them, and the client became his debtor.

The stage of setting contacts was followed by the stage of fighting for the client's interests. As a rule, here it meant getting certain benefits - e.g. a position, an award or a grant. In several cases it also dealt with the problem of lobbying the economical and other interests

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of different groups (getting state orders, opening banks and so on). The arsenal of the broker resources looked rather impressive: it meant using the periodicals, letters, remonstrance, even rumors. We may define here the two fundamental components of the process of struggle for the result — the public one and the backstage one. The public component included influencing the public opinion by the means of the periodicals, and the backstage component presupposed individual work with the officials who were in charge of making decisions. Sometimes it happened that the achievement of the desired aim was hindered by competition or open hostility towards the other local network. Such conflicts were often accompanied by discrediting the opponent.

Finally, the third stage of cooperation can be called “profit fixation”, if we are using the financial vocabulary. As it was regularly stated in historiography, the most important profit of the broker was spreading his individual network after the successful operation, as well as increase of his symbolic capital because of rumors about his “growing influence”. Judging by that, monetary compensation of broker’s services was not regular, if it existed at all. Means of subsistence were acquired in a different way. The links in governmental and financial circles provided the broker with a solid income by the means of sinecure (e.g. positions in the Board of directors at the bank), placing governmental orders at the printing office, publishing official advertisements, paying out subsidies and pensions.

The potential of the local networking was determined not only by the quantity of the open communication channels, but also by the quality of the relations between people. Ideally, these relations were to be built upon mutual trust, sympathy and evident readiness to give assistance, and marked by reliability providing the stability of these links within the ever changing state of affairs. In practice such quality of relations was, to a greater or lesser extent, embodied into the pattern of friendship. As the analysis of letters to different people belonging to the category of “patrons” shows, the brokers used similar techniques: positioned themselves as a faithful friend, flattered their correspondents, assured of their love, aspired to “a place in the soul”, and emotionally reacted to fulfilling

or not fulfilling their requests. Their friendship with the patrons could be transient or last for years, but it’s very typical that it was quite often accompanied by scandals.

Prince Meschersky, general Bogdanovich and Dr. Badmaev were known to be correspondents of the two last Emperors, Alexander III and Nicholas II. They were interesting because they were connected with the active society and because they were well-informed of its expectations (or at least the opinion of its “conservative” part). This idea explains the fact that the two last Emperors rarely met the brokers in person, but appeared to be regular readers of their newspapers, diaries and letters. Surely, the information and recommendations from the brokers did not always influence the official government policy. At the same time, there are several examples of their participation in making meaningful decisions and working out the drafts of the reforms (provisional closing of the High women courses, Manifest of 26th February 1903).

Permanent gain of new communication channels and loss of some old ones determined the dynamic change of each local network. They did not stay calm. The attractiveness of the salon depended a lot upon the actual links of the broker with the court and the government: during the years when the host was in monarch’s favor, his salon was more eagerly attended. However, even considering all the importance of the strategic contacts with the czar and ministers, no one of those mentioned can be regarded separately as a crucially important one. The stability of the network was provided by many communication channels. This really helped the brokers to recover after all regular court crisis. Thus, it leads us to the idea that the attempts to study the phenomenon of their political “influence” being oriented only at their private relations with the monarch and neglecting the salon links, can significantly limit and simplify the reconstruction of the past.

In literature, the interaction between the patron and the client, in its simplest way, is presented as a closed system based upon the exchange of services. The presence of a professional broker not only makes this system more complex, but changes the service rotation within it. The political salon cannot be imagined in isolation from the external environment. The

broker needed advertising, spreading the rumors about his “influence” for his symbolic capital gain, as well as involving new patrons and clients into his individual network.

Caring about business reputation determined serious attitude towards even minor deals. Every client could show his gratitude to the broker for his award or appointment only by staying within the salon and spreading positive references. Very often it happened that no other services were needed. Any story about the magic patronage, which opened the doors that had been locked before, could positively reflect upon the manipulator’s credit. It is notable that brokers disliked people who broke off all the contacts after getting the patronage; their papers contain the passages about “mean people” who managed to squeeze in, but then disappeared from the salon forever.

The problem of the “lack of people” – educated, smart and devoted – was considered traditional for the governmental bodies of Russia. Political salons were often attended by many brisk and smart people. Some of them were appointed as the candidates to the positions. The local network was working as a real filter, selecting and delegating the people who, possessing certain knowledge, abilities and beliefs, would as well show flexibility and readiness for cooperating with “friends”.

The brokers could seriously think that they worked for the welfare of the country, served the interests of the Russian monarch and se-

lected reliable candidates for the positions. However, we should note that the local network interests sometimes contradicted the interests of the state: promoting the client, the broker tried to block the candidates of other networks even when they turned to be smarter. Besides, the tactics of entangling the top officials with personal obligations finally led to the fact that the officials had to consider not only the professional duties, but the opinion of the “friends”. The network pressure was less visible during the period of strong power; however, at the beginning of the XX century the situation changed significantly, and many representatives of the top officials began to respect the salons and followed their recommendations.

During the second half of XIX- beginning of the XX centuries the salons began to change rapidly: the membership of visitors was enlarging, the specialization was beginning to be formed. How can this evolution be explained? We should seek the answer in the change of the state of affairs. The city elite showed growing interest towards politics, and the official authorities could not neglect their voices. The last Romanovs needed intelligencers who would confidentially delivered reliable information about the public mood and evaluated the candidates for the official positions. Political salons coped with this task. Their success was determined by the structural changes in the public life of Russia at the boundary of the XIX-XX centuries.

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