University Bureaucracy in Russia
as the Research Object in Modern Sociology

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Abstract. The research work deals with the peculiarities of modern Russian universities bureaucracy features which play the key role as the characteristic aspect of modern corporation educational culture. The necessity of sociological analysis and its status definition, positive and negative consequences of formation and evolution are emphasized to be of great importance according to the research. The work is based on the idea that there is still no proficient analysis of the university bureaucracy phenomenon in the majority of actual sociological works as well as there are no evident reasons explaining the basis of the phenomenon. The needed reasons to be analyzed are as following: the absence of a systematic approach to the study of university bureaucratization process, the need for the analysis mainly in the context of higher education reformation procedure; uncritical reproduction of classical theories for bureaucracy provisions types requiring actual clarification of modern society peculiarities; the lack of special works presenting the status of university bureaucracy associated with the context of digital transformational society; the problem of institutionalized hypocrisy. Finally, the authors conclude that the formulation of the highlighted problems requires empirical verification and is worth discussing in the professional sociological community brunch.

Keywords: Bureaucracy · University · University bureaucracy · Digitalization · Bureaucratic corporation culture

1 Introduction

The administrative and bureaucratic management systems formulated in modern universities have been a disputed question in the aspect of high education problems' peculiarities [1–13]. This situation presents a natural reflection of the social processes' reality characterized by the fact that "academic managerialism and bureaucratization of higher education served as prerequisites for the transformation of managers into a key university community, often opposing two main ones – students and teachers" [2] p. 5235. The negative consequences of these metamorphoses (or as it has been called by A.M. Osipov, beuropathologies [6], which are typical not only for Russia and to some extent described in the literature [14–18]), influenced almost all spheres of the university space, including researchers.

However, the bureaucratization of the university environment is only one aspect to be discussed within the general trends in the development of modern reality. "Bureaucratic yoke", as it has been defined by the modern form of bureaucratic domination by V.A. Perederiy [7] P. 5737, functions as a global problem, and its "binding" to the education sphere is due rather than to a special (in comparison with other spheres) acuteness, but more or less it is of a clear awareness that the bureaucratic system permeated with the spirit of formalism is fundamentally incompatible with the content-oriented components of human activity of scientific and educational processes.

Therefore, there is an awkward question to be answered: how could it happen that in the meritocratic and initially humanitarian environment of the university, organized thanks to the idea of education as a process of cultural and social individual's reproduction, and, therefore, focused on the search for the true meanings of human activity, still there are actual practices closed to formal rationality which essence is reduced to a rigid calculation of action results with a focus on regulations and service instructions (on rationality for its own sake)? The answer to it is often sought in references to the effectiveness of bureaucratic management, justified by the researcher M. Weber. But, if the bureaucracy in universities optimizes the management process then why do the results of such optimization still seem very doubtful to many specialists [5, 8, 9, 13, 19] ?

Obviously, there can be other similar questions worth discussing. However, the purpose of this article is to understand why in the vast majority of sociological works that touch the problem of university environment bureaucratization, the answers to them are based, as a rule, only in stating the current situation, but there is no deep causal analysis of the formation and evolution of the university bureaucracy phenomenon.

2   Results and Discussion

It should be noted that the increased interest of various social sciences representatives, including sociologists, in the phenomenon of university bureaucracy was associated with a large-scale reformation process of the higher education system (the titles of publications are indicative in this regard [1, 5]). We may consider the increase in attempts to conduct scientific research on this issue as a fairly typical case of an adhocratic (from *ad hoc* – which means *on occasion*) approach. By its nature despite its limitations it does not cause rejection (from time to time many of us are forced to respond to the current challenges of today, violating our own plans and postponing long-term projects). However, in our research work, the adhocratic approach was developed by specialists who were included in the reformed system and experienced the numerous steps of this process. It is quite understandable that in the current conditions, it was difficult for many of them to count on the most objective methodological reflection on the bureaucratization of higher education institutions. And this fact somehow explains the origins of unambiguous conclusions that "education in Russia is entering a bureaucratic impasse", and it needs further disputes as it is stressed by researchers H.G. Thagapsoev and M.B. Sapunov [11] p. 88.

Therefore, the "sociological image of bureaucracy" recreated by sociologists often not only lacks integrity, but it is a projection of the fears and phobias of the authors. Representing the kind of sublimation, it is usually almost enthusiastically accepted by

counterparties close in status and attitude, but in reality it represents a kind of trap since it immanently implies a rejection of an objective analysis to the problem. Moreover, such an "incomplete image" is extremely vulnerable to criticism.

It is possible to avoid the trap of the adhocratic approach only by developing and implementing long-term research programs focused not just on a systematic study of bureaucracy in the modern world but involving its analysis as a dispersed corporation culture while its substructures (or "subcorporations") are distributed across spheres of life and levels of management, but, nevertheless, are united by common formalized and not formalized values, rules and norms. One of these "subcorporations" types is the university bureaucracy.

While discussing modern bureaucracy peculiarities (including its university hypostasis), researchers usually take into consideration the works of sociology classics. However, there came many questions analyzing the modern university bureaucracy features in the paradigm of Weber's concept rationality. At first glance, this question is absolutely legitimate, since according to the well-founded opinion by J. Ritzer "bureaucratization is considered as a classic example of rationalization" [20]. p. 46. However, if we apply the M. Weber approach to the assessment of the current university management, the rationality of the latter will be very doubtful. One must stress, it is more appropriate to focus on the concept of A. Etzioni [21], who pointed out the differences between the rationality of efficiency and the rationality of survival. And what J. Ritzer calls efficiency is simply survival – for some time now a priority in the functioning of the university bureaucracy and – to a large extent forced – the entire university community, as the author stresses.

It is possible that the imaginary irrationality of bureaucracy in universities is a well-founded and reflexive position, and its essence was formulated by N. Taleb who stresses that "what makes it possible to survive is rational" [22]. p. 319. But it should be noted that some ideas about the university bureaucracy which have already become classical, need to be revised in the conditions of modern social reality. Based on the foundation of its modus vivendi, it will probably have to consider the survival factor of both - the entire corporation and its representatives, evaluating other versions either as sincere delusions or as an attempt of conscious deception.

Within this approach type features the modern university bureaucracy turns out to be very rational since it has ensured and continues to ensure the reproduction of higher education in an extremely unstable social environment and despite all the arguments about the apocalypse of the education system. It is worth mentioning, the attempts to combat the administrative system seem to be irrational. The problem here is that the survival mindset limits opportunities development. And at the same time, it contradicts to the declarations of university members board and the education system as a whole regarding the attitudes towards renewal, innovative solutions and progress in general. The attempts to ignore this contradiction both by university managers and by sociologists investigating the process of their activities create a significant barrier in the process of understanding real rather than simulated trends in the development of higher education process.

In this context, while analyzing the status and evolution of the university bureaucracy, the digitalization factor becomes particularly important. The digitalization of

public space based on the process of computerization, including the educational brunch of the university life, changes as it is mentioned in works by O.N. Yanitsky. The author stresses the essence of the phenomena and processes affected by it saying that "having emerged as a tool facilitating social processes gradually turned into a way of special existence" [23]. p. 8. The author is sure that digitalization is one of the most serious challenges to the humanities; he stresses declaring that the element of this challenge is fully the functioning of the bureaucratic system of the university, the educational space, and is now transformed under the intense influence of digital technologies. Moreover, this transformation manifests itself not only in qualitative changes of a technical, technological and methodological nature but also in the modification of the socio-cultural environment reality. However, it is extremely difficult to understand how these changes affect the dispositions of university semi-managers and semi–officials since researchers still lack answers to many fundamental aspects of digitalization process influencing the life peculiarities of high education. As the researcher V.N. Minina emphasizes, today "there are practically no works that would be devoted to the transformation of this institution under the influence of digitalization and related to social risks as a probability of a positive or negative outcome of events for the society" [24]. P. 85.

However, without analyzing theoretical questions ground, it is extremely difficult to research practically oriented ones. As a result, it is often necessary to meet vague estimates of the prospects for the impact of digitalization on certain parameters of the bureaucratic system behavior which are more speculative in nature than reflect the results of empirical data rational interpretation. Of course, time will pass and researchers seem to provide the society with the needed answers to questions related with the modification of the bureaucratic corporation university culture under the influence of the digitalization process. But it may be too late in order to minimize the risks that are hot questions needed the urgent solutions.

The quality of the received sociological knowledge directly depends on the readiness and ability of the object to an open and honest dialogue. In relation to bureaucracy this willingness and ability to do so has always seemed a problematic idea. Pierre Bourdieu, considering the attitude of officials to corruption, referred to Pierre-Etienne Ville and wrote that the "situation of institutional corruption" characteristic puts officials in an eternally ambiguous position"; analyzing the actual problem Ville speaks of the problem as of "constant schizophrenia" or "institutionalized hypocrisy" [25]. p. 525. He attributed this to the fact that "bureaucracy… is taken simultaneously as something rational, transparent and as something corrupt… Officials have a double image of themselves" [25]. pp. 526–527. Therefore, there is a question which is quite natural: to what extent is this kind of hypocrisy inherent in the modern university bureaucracy? One must mention, it would be catastrophic to transfer the characteristics given by P. Bourdieu to government officials to their university colleagues without sufficient analysis. While trying to answer this question we inevitably fall into the space of uncertainties caused either by a lack of empirical information or its questionable adequacy to the real state of affairs.

At least three circumstances influencing the problem should be pointed out. Firstly, the university bureaucracy (especially its representatives holding senior positions) is marked by the desire to deproblematize educational reality within the framework of

public discourse. In this regard, it is enough to analyze publications imbued with a positive worldview and optimism belonging to members of this cohort [26], and it is not only an attempt to identify problem areas that undoubtedly exist. Actually, they expect a similar "positive aspect" from sociologists especially since they are usually formally dependent, and informally they are often predisposed to servility. Such an attitude significantly distorts reality. Secondly, this is the possibility of obtaining representative sociological information about the state of a bureaucratic corporation, especially about the nature of intra-group relations and the specifics of corporate culture which raises doubts. The officials are not particularly ready to disclose the specifics of internal corporate relations and ties, guided by the interpretation of the solidarity principle as an attitude to "non-disclosure" of information having the potential to damage the authority of the leadership which is usually equated with the authority of the entire university. Teachers and researchers who are almost completely dependent on the administration (which is especially typical for universities in regions with a limited labor market) prefer not to provoke a negative reaction of the university leadership by presenting their own position, especially if it contains elements of criticism. Thirdly, there is a purposeful administrative reduction in the possibilities of empirical sociological research in universities. The sociological experience proves that university officials usually perceive attempts to conduct them by outside sociologists extremely negatively and try to control those carried out by their own specialists. As a result, institutionalized hypocrisy acquires a kind of legitimacy since it is based on a system of conventional norms and relevant practices. And it is extremely difficult to overcome this barrier in the process of trying to establish the true facts.

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3   Conclusion

To conclude, the list of problems and causes that generate and limit the possibilities of sociological research of the university bureaucracy is limitless. It is also quite clear that it is not possible to "cancel" them due to the peculiarities of the object only by improving the methodology of research, although this question seems of great importance. However, there are still questions on the need for such a "remake" as well as on the formation of an adequate idea of bureaucracy in higher education environment. A serious argument in favor of bureaucracy research in a modern university is the conclusion that by leaving it in the "shadow sector" of professional sociological discourse we are once again postponing the risks that happen as a result of its customary repeated activities. But in the relatively near future, the number of these risks may grow to an extent that does not allow eliminating their negative consequences by the forces of the Russian state.

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