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Elite Dynamics and Political Gamesmanship: Exploring the Modern Stage of Elitogenesis

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Abstract. According to the contemporary stage of elitist origin, elite rivalry is the primary driver of societal change. In this way, the most potent catalysts for significant inventions and politically motivated initiatives in contemporary governments are the political ploys and manipulations of elite groups. However, the ways in which the ruling circles actually carry out their duties are more closely linked to coalitional forms of political dominance that emerge at the nexus of the interests of different elite groups, a confluence of their status and unofficial connections. However, their managerial competencies have not grown as much as the population as a whole, which sets the stage for decision-making and resource allocation to become more opaque. Clarifying the true effects of these changes on the dynamics of the ruling class as well as the interactions between the state and society presents a study challenge in this setting. The use of network approaches and structural and functional research methods enables us to state that, even today, the coalition “games” in the ruling class signal the structural self-renewal of the ruling circles, bringing more autonomous (post) elite communities that control key resource allocation mechanisms while simultaneously losing their responsibility to society. This is in addition to the adjustment of political projects or ideological and political compromises in updating government strategies. In addition to enhancing the latent character of public policy development and the distance between them, their informal means of influencing public policy aim to deepen the internal differences within the ruling circles.

Keywords: ruling minority, ruling class, political elites, government, state, society, post-elite, conflicts

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Дивергенция правящего класса и игры политиков: штрихи к современной стадии элитогенеза

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Аннотация. Современная стадия элитогенеза утверждает ведущую роль внутри элитарного соперничества в качестве источника общественных трансформаций. В этом смысле маневры и политические игры элитарных группировок являются наиболее мощными триггерами масштабных инноваций и политически целесообразных проектов в современных государствах. При этом актуальные формы осуществления правящими кругами своего функционала связаны не столько с институциональными, сколько с коалиционными формами политического доминирования, складывающимися на пересечении интересов различных элитарных групп, сочетания их статусных и неформальных связей. При этом неизменным остается преимущественный рост их управленческих компетенций по сравнению с населением, что создает предпосылки для усиления непрозрачности действий по принятию решений и распределению ресурсов. В этом контексте возникает исследовательская задача, предполагающая выяснение актуальных последствий этих тенденций, причем как для динамики самого правящего слоя, так и отношений государства и общества. Использование сетевых подходов и структурно-функциональных методов исследования позволяет констатировать, что уже сегодня коалиционные «игры» в правящем классе демонстрируют не только корректировку политических проектов или идейно-политические компромиссы при обновлении государственных стратегий, но и сигнализируют о структурном самообновлении правящих кругов, выводящих на историческую арену более автономные (пост)элитарные сообщества, контролирующие ключевые механизмы распределения ресурсов, но при этом утрачивающие ответственность перед обществом. Используемые ими неформальные методы влияния на цели государственной политики усиливают внутренние размежевания правящих кругов, одновременно повышая латентный характер разработки государственной политики и увеличивая дистанцию между государством и обществом.

Ключевые слова: правящее меньшинство, правящий класс, политические элиты, власть, государство, общество, постэлиты, конфликты

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**Instead of an Introduction:
Political Reality and Phantom Pains of Retrospective Elitology**

Experience from around the world has clearly demonstrated that the most significant and direct cause of societal change has been and continues to be the quality and composition of the ruling minority. The emergence of representative mechanisms, procedural dependencies on voters, the acquisition of civil status by state institutions, and the necessity of producing mass values to maintain political communications with the populace were all predetermined by the elite phase, which began in the New Age with the gradual formation of the ruling circles' qualitatively new connections with society. To put it simply, these changes told society that it had a chance to enter the "halls of power" and take part in RESOURCE distribution. These political cues then sparked a series of rather fanciful attempts to defend not only the likelihood that the ruling elites would later transfer their functionality to society, but also the development of a new social structure model based on this theory (K. Marx, V. Lenin, J. Ortega and Gasset). But in reality, the theories that interpreted the elites' historical movement as a threat to their hegemony remained theories. The desire to "democratize" democracy was sparked by the desire to see the public consistently distanced from the actual mechanisms of distributing society's resources and assets, but even the successive waves of democratization have failed to show the true participation of society in the process of making important government decisions.

World experience has demonstrated quite convincingly that sudden shifts in a state's political trajectory, the initiation of intra-elite conflict, "palace" coups, or various instances of discrimination towards citizens against the backdrop of increasingly personalistic and autocratic state governance, as well as other comparable facts, highlight the dominant role of the ruling circles. Those forces that are primarily motivated to bolster their domination and supremacy (up to political hegemony and monopolization of power) and do not wish to share their privileges with society. It is no accident that experts observe that continual "political improvisations" characterized by "ideological pride" limit the authorities' "ability to make sensitive [for society-author] decisions" and, in the end, cause "people to feel economically and socially abandoned" [Díaz 2021]. In societies with a heterogeneous culture, the authorities not only provoke constant leaps and shifts in state policy, but also support numerous manifestations of false identity among people (forming one group solidarity at the expense of another). It is no secret that even in the bosom of world politics, inter-elite associations are becoming more influential players than intergovernmental institutions. In a word, the ruling elites are predominantly moving not towards society and its interests, but on the contrary, they are increasing alienation from their population.

However, the political will of the ruling circles, which has greater influence than the importance of civil structures and any state institutions, determines the paths of state development, the allocation of substantial resources, and even more specific ways of moving public assets. Since the current stage of historical development offers no unique justification for complementary assessments of the political role of the masses or stable prospects for the development of democracy, this situation compels us to reconsider the prospects of relations between the state and society. Deep skepticism is sparked in this context by theoretical clichés that claim the “responsibility of the authorities” to society or the essential “participation of civil society” in “making state decisions”, among other morally conditioned proverbs that are obviously at odds with the actual situation. It seems like a theoretical paradox to try to identify in today’s experience the basis for future growth in the political and administrative interactions between the people and the government.

There is every reason to believe that the New Age’s historical framework of the ruling class and the populace’s shared responsibility has essentially reached the end of its capacity to explain. In addition to having enough experience and expertise for efficient governance, the ruling elites—particularly in the most developed nations—have also diminished the civil sector’s power claims and even the populace’s actual right to contest political decisions. Essentially, the “political will” of the government, which filters and interprets societal requirements, is increasingly the main—and perhaps the only—source for formulating state policies.

Through the expansion of the state bureaucracy’s discretionary powers, the replication of corrupt and rent-oriented practices, and ongoing inter-institutional frictions and rivalry between leaders (their constituents), indirect and ineffective connections between citizens and the ruling circles maintain intra-elite conflicts as the primary source of the latter’s self-development. In the context of developing important political decisions, the ruling circles consistently employ covert means of coordinating objectives and interests that are concealed from the public while actively collaborating with informal (network) coalitions of large business owners and controllers (as well as other resource-equipped groups).

The atmosphere of inter-elite communications, which is internally diverse, makes the realm of power and government a place where different factions of the ruling class can constantly maneuver. However, network players attempt to take control of and colonize (traumatize AND exhaust their civil functionality) the main institutions of power from within by destroying administrative barriers informally, whereas status players primarily use hierarchical mechanisms of rivalry and lobbies or groups of organized interests aim to establish a foothold in the governing apparatus. All these maneuvers not only lead to the formation of various associations

of status and informal actors.¹ They frequently transform public administration into a “game room”, disregarding the interests of society in favor of putting the centers and nodes of distribution of public resources under the authority of the victorious coalition within walking distance [Solovyev 2024]. Furthermore, the most powerful organizations compete with members of the leader’s inner circle in an effort to work together on specific topics.

The primary tactics used by political “gamers” involve allocating their funds to systems that increase their real power. At the same time, these tasks always elicit the tendency of these players toward various forms of autonomization (including distancing themselves from expert opinion), which turns into the ultimate manifestation of the ruling elite’s impromptu maneuvering in the sphere of power. This tendency is fueled by the actors’ ambitions, vanity, or jealousy of more successful partners [Twersky, Kahneman 1986]. These “gamers” can lose their responsibility to the state and society by acting in ways that serve their own interests (not stopping at multiple political identity changes or changing opinions on the go). For instance, when they try to harm their rivals, they frequently wind up “under a false flag”, which distorts national interests.² In any event, the state can concurrently implement a variety of contradictory “state policies” (J. Alison) while controlling the actual level of stability and social tension because these “games” “do not contain the whole truth” (P. Bourdieu). At the same time, society functions as a wholly insignificant source of political power in this context, utilized only by the elite organizations with the fewest resources, who manipulate public opinion to bolster their positions of authority.

The establishment of numerous management startups that create alternative paths of political choice both domestically and internationally (not to mention the spread of “man-made risks” sparked by this struggle) is a sign of elite competition, reflecting the mobile degree of internal divergence of the ruling forces (E. Giddens). The core interests of this layer are actually threatened by those players who are guided by high moral and ethical standards and civil society principles, as elite actors’ orientation to their own interests is intrinsically tied to self-reproduction in the realm of power.

Scholars have been discussing the significance of elite strata’s internal divisions for the evolution of society since the middle of the 20th century [Keller 1963]. Some scientists

¹ The epistemological reflection of these political games is a sharp rise in the political analysis of transcripts of metaphorical content, such as assemblages, power machines, sporadic coalitions, subsystems, and other variations of the “assembly” of various segments of the ruling class. This is because these political games cannot be explained within the framework of rationally consistent models.

² For instance, J. Biden’s most recent actions, even before to his resignation as US president, not only made matters more difficult for the incoming administration but also foreshadowed the nation’s increased engagement in wars in Europe and the Middle East.

believe that these divisions are a sign of the ruling strata's "group neurosis" [Stagner 1936]. Science is currently investigating a variety of intra-elite contradictions, including those that are unrelated to the reasons for conflictogenicity, as well as those that are structural [Solovyev 2021], ideological [Higley, Burton 2012], and functional [Keller 1963]. In the latter instance, K. Khudoley and Yu. Kolotayev discuss "polarization" (which "reinforces the disintegration" of the ruling stratum into groups with opposing interests and positions), "fragmentation" (which reflects "the tendency to reduce" or terminate communications that developed at the previous stage), and "segmentation", which indicates elite divisions "while maintaining mutual contacts" [Khudoley, Kolotayev 2024].

Nonetheless, the understanding of the growing political power of elite groups, which challenges (destroys) the aspirational ideas of the "development elites" who ought to guide societies to the "heights of progress" (for instance, by becoming proficient with new digital tools) or the capacity of society to take charge of its objectives and practices, unites the application of different classifiers [Okhotsky, Grigoryan 2022; Plyays 2024; Timofeeva³ et al. 2013]. In other words, society has not yet developed reliable means of subordinating the mechanisms of imperative regulation and coordination of intergroup competition of the ruling class to its advantage. While elite circles are consistently mastering new spaces and technologies (including digital ones) of their political dominance.

To put it briefly, the ruling elites learn to more confidently manage the electoral process, limit the opportunities of the opposition, erect administrative barriers in front of the populace, and maintain the necessary balance between control and concessions to citizens, even though there are negligible democratic deliberation mechanisms in place in society. Furthermore, the ruling circles collaborate with outside parties by continuously bolstering the mechanisms of actual power on national platforms, which expands the area of social control over the populace.

Trends and Directions of Modern Elitogenesis: Comparing Normative Constructs with Obviousness

Mechanisms that, on the one hand, show a combination of different (micro) group (sectoral, territorial, and trans-territorial) communities within the ruling class and, on the other hand, certain general, integrated trends (associated with the consistent strengthening of their positions of power) operate within the framework of the ruling class's self-reproduction and self-renewal. Under the guise of neoliberal regimes, the most resource-rich segments of the ruling class in several Western nations have even

³ See: [Okhotsky, Grigoryan 2022; Pleis 2024]; *Timofeeva L.N.* Renegades or new strata of development? Into what categories can the current counter-elite be divided and what does it strive for // *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 03.09.2013.

changed the structural parameters of democratic public administration by fusing the primary mechanisms of administrative and economic activity with power structures, institutionalizing the informal profile of discursive relations, and upholding the statist principles of governance. Essentially, this “led to... an authoritarian statist form of neoliberal regime, characteristic of states of permanent austerity, requiring increased surveillance and control to maintain itself”, which in turn validated Nicos Poulantzas’s hypothesis that authoritarian statism is becoming the norm for capitalist-style societal development [Jessop 2019]. The use of armed “security” formations by big actors to safeguard their positions in the economic and administrative sectors is equally noteworthy and lays the groundwork for a completely new phase of competition.

We can discuss the two general tendencies of elitogenesis as a whole. *First*, we can document the way that ruling circles have gradually concealed the various forms of their dominance, allowing them to privatize benefits and nationalize costs under the guise of a “scientifically substantiated” and “rationally verified” state policy. Additionally, the authorities view their political supremacy as a way to organize public order, which obscures the beneficiaries of such a political line, the more riches are dispersed around the nation.

It is obvious that this kind of state design assumes the relocation of the civilian population to the far political perimeter, even though it is linked to the widespread dissatisfaction of citizens with democratic systems [Levitsky, Ziblatt 2018; Przeworski 2019]. The key issue is that the actual institutions of state policy development cannot be altered by the increasingly obvious calls for change.

The second, no less significant tendency in the development of the ruling class shows how the managerial expertise and talents of the ruling class have grown, progressively widening the divide with respect to the comparable levels of ordinary citizens’ political participation. Furthermore, elite organizations successfully exploit competency differences to bolster their domination, even while the level of population participation varies among nations. Simultaneously, the elites in several nations strengthen their hold on power by restricting citizens’ access to the Internet (China, North Korea, etc.), cutting back on political organizations that provide civic education and enlightenment, and altering secondary school and university curricula, etc.⁴

⁴ The establishment of Singapore’s “smart nation” model serves as an example in this respect, where citizens must unconditionally refrain from interfering with state authority and governance processes in order to receive high-quality government goods and services [Smorgunov 2021]. Over the last three years, the Russian Federation has suspended sociology, political science, and cultural studies courses at educational institutions, shut down over 2,000 socially conscious non-governmental organizations, and more.

The asymmetry of resources distributed, intra-elite conflicts, and the varied nature of elite influence on civil sector structures are all supported by the designated tendencies of self-reproduction of the ruling class, which give rise to *three* main directions in the everyday format. *Project, ideological, and structural changes* are some of these directions; they provide a framework for elites to address external issues, settle internal disputes, and advance their political “game library” skills.

Therefore, *design* changes personify the intentional character of the ruling class’s professional activity by reflecting a mix of its political-administrative and commercial operations. With a distinct blend of routine and creative activity, the elite’s projects (plans, strategies) not only strengthen their ties with society but also incite conflict between the ruling class’s sectoral interests.⁵ This kind of rivalry between elite groups is becoming a significant source of state power diversification and posing major risks to the execution of national strategies (not to mention the use of force against individuals and groups within the ruling regime). It also contributes to the multi-vector nature of state policies and frequently results in “semi-hostile” relations between structures and institutions (A. Wildavsky). However, the most fundamental relevance is the ongoing disputes in political leaders’ immediate and distant environments.⁶

Experience has demonstrated that, although intra-elite rivalry leads to an increase in the ruling class’s activity and the innovative filling of administrative gaps in the state, the negative effects of such competitive practices include the strengthening of administrative barriers and the blocking of individual institutions’ activities. The national elite may become more reliant on outside forces as a result of major projects (related to the attraction of foreign capital, including its shadow forms), which could raise the possibility of the state’s actual loss of external sovereignty due to the emergence of inter-elite cooperation.⁷

⁵ As a result, interest in the growth of the knowledge economy, green energy, or digital government, as well as in combating corruption, actually shows typical instances of targeted activity by different intra-elite groups that cause friction between institutions in a variety of state platforms and arenas.

⁶ These conflicts become more complex when different political teams look for “moles” or “defectors” to provide critical information. This can lead to political disputes, crises of legitimacy, and even regime upheaval. The first person’s bodyguard in Ukraine under Kuchma’s rule fled to the United States due to information that implicated him, sparking a huge global scandal that seriously harmed the President’s reputation.

⁷ Regretfully, there are several instances in practice where national elites have altered their status dispositions and became satellites of outside forces by concentrating on the material or social advantages of such interactions and becoming the exclusive beneficiaries of such designs. Put another way, the existence of material and social interests of these ruling class representatives outside of their country of origin invariably shifts the ruling class’s reliance on the populace to unity with foreign actors, reorganizing the way their institutions of power operate and endowing them with an anti-state nature. Russian experience has shown that domestic state managers viewed the industries they regulated from the perspective of foreign players rather than domestic interests when working on major international

Mythological, ideological, and other concepts that guarantee the creation of mass values are used by ruling circles to strengthen their positions, which determines the degree of legitimacy and the populace's capacity to support political plans. This is reflected in the *ideological direction* of elite transformation. The chosen doctrines and the efficacy of their discursive application determine the character of the victorious coalition's rule [Solovyev 2024], which is compelled to rely on specific demographic groupings while simultaneously fending off the ideological pressure of its rivals.

The ideological design of elite goals, which are chosen from the current pool of ideas and give one a competitive edge, is a unique way to create political will in its content. Three issues can be resolved at once by authentically presenting this information in public discourse: calculating the “costs and benefits” of one's political path in a practical manner; projecting a favorable image of leaders and their objectives; and gaining symbolic advantages over rivals in public discourse.⁸ To achieve this, the ruling circles employ a variety of administrative tools (blocking individual media outlets, expanding the circle of spontaneous loyalists and the “fed public” popularizing certain ideas and values [Harkordin 2021], organizing GONGs and KWONGs [Lushnikov 2019], using spoiler parties in elections, etc.) in addition to communication strategies (such as the “politics of evidence”, which entails pushing through the decisions necessary for the authorities [Solovyev 2021], or “counter-rhetorical strategies”, which allow changing various styles of managing “civil anger”, and providing “convincing” explanations of the impossibility of satisfying all requests from the population [Ibarra, Kitsuse 2003]).

Furthermore, the general interests of the ruling class show that it is not interested in or utilizing the intellectual capital of society and its innovative potential, even though there are still “islands” of civil free thought and distinct platforms for openly opposing the objectives and values put forth by the authorities in many nations with intricately structured societies. The traumas of the authorities' existential choice and the citizens' orientational “imagination of the future” only worsen in the context of abrupt ideological shifts, which are typically accompanied by institutional changes (supporting the specified political vector in the fields of science, education, and culture).⁹

projects, such as the reforms of the 1990s, which even foreign experts viewed as part of the “Chicago destruction of Russia” (B. Jessop).

⁸ Though it is not an exact replica of the corporate interests of elite organizations, the ideological selection of state policy is a tool of ideational domination. Therefore, the leaders' and their close and distant circles' delusions, as well as other objectives and pictures with meanings that people cannot decipher, are frequently concealed under the symbols of the “new” and “bright” future they declare.

⁹ The ruling circles in Russia, where freedom-loving traditions and authoritarian norms have coexisted for centuries [Likhachev 1990], are unable to “synthesize an organic tradition” [Malinova 2009], which would enable them to omit social upheavals and profound mental conflicts

The worst risks, however, occur when national interests are flatly fabricated; even the population's safety is used as leverage to further the private and corporate objectives of certain ruling class factions.¹⁰

The Key Problem of Elitogenesis

Reflecting the actions of exogenous and endogenous factors that determine both the internal splits of this layer and the truly historical transformations of the power structure of the national state and republican government as such, the structural renewal of the ruling class seems to be the most significant direction of elitogenesis. And the primary cause of these changes in elite circles is the actions of ruling class network coalitions, whose members—big business owners, managers, and controllers of corporate property, among others—put steady, unofficial pressure on the institutions of state power and official structures despite not having status prerogatives. These associations aim to “network colonize” the entire state administration system and establish a “new constitutionalism”, in contrast to lobbyists who are ultimately interested in assimilating into the legal hierarchies of state administration. They do this by overcoming administrative barriers solely through targeted informal communications [Gill 1995].

This pattern reflects the “acceleration in elite renewal” [Best, Higley (Ed.) 2010], which creates unique structures of “small... ruling minorities” [Higley, Pakulsky 2012], taking up a larger position in the power structure. In this environment, “intertwined” institutions that have lost some of their functionality due to the effect of these “unusual”, including corrupt, arrangements are constantly created by the day-to-day operations of government [Jessop 2019]. In certain states, decision-making centers become “nodes” and are removed from the state's administrative structure due to the extent of network pressure on government institutions. In its logical limit, the “second circuit” of actual

when altering state strategies. According to Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth (2011), the opposite occurs more frequently when narrative politics technologies are employed to increase the mobilization pressure on society's consciousness. This invariably causes cultural divisions and enables the authorities to appeal to more stable models of everyday human identification. Notwithstanding the potential for unity (transcendence) between the state and society, the ideological direction of self-renewal of the ruling circles rarely succeeds without escalating the internal incongruence of the authorities' strategic objectives with the state and the dynamics of the populace's and mass culture's political consciousness.

¹⁰ The situation that emerged in the nation in the 1990s is a clear illustration of the disparity between the concepts that have gained popularity and the actual policy that the authorities are pursuing. The system of state governance was then consistently oligarchized at the top, which significantly increased the risk of territorial anarchy, the semi-disintegration of a single state, and an internal political crisis against the backdrop of the democratic vector of social development and the government of E. Gaidar's ambitions to “buy out” the nation from the nomenklatura.

public administration—which is made up of many “decision nodes”—implies the creation of a parallel state 2.0 that is concealed from the general public [Solovyev 2021a].

Consequently, network pressure is coupled with the expansion of executive authority’s power, while at the same time creating a circle of people who “rule in the shadow of the hierarchy” and do not feel accountable to the populace [Jessop 2019]. The nature of the interaction between the ruling minority and society at large is fundamentally altered by this circumstance, which suggests the emergence of a unique class of “political investors” who take advantage of the “gaps” in the republican government system (E. Schattschneider). In light of these changes in the ruling class, only those groups and individuals who rely on representative mechanisms—which represent a replaceable, “disposable elite”—maintain responsible ties with society, even though they are compelled to answer to the populace for these decisions.

The methods of forming and operating this layer not only change the primary recruitment mechanisms (prioritizing informal connections, rotation technologies, and co-optation over representative mechanisms) or re-profiling the functionality of state managers (increasingly favoring private and group interests of network coalitions), but they also result in a split within the ruling class rather than intra-elite divisions. Because of their actual ability to influence the institutions of power by adopting important state choices, we are discussing the existence of a stable priority of a particular segment of the ruling class. As a result, this group is evolving into a post-elite class that no longer need interaction with society to function as a government, much less have any obligation to the populace. Nevertheless, they not only maintain but also enhance their gaming communications with rivals.

It goes without saying that this post-elite conception of the governing class has not yet been codified in laws. However, it already exhibits systemically important power-use practices and dominating forms of influence on state policy objectives. Essentially, this is the reason why the current elitogenesis phase shows how a new type of relationship between society and the ruling circles is emerging. This new relationship is already rebuilding the system of relationships and the institutional design within the governing apparatus. As a result, the ruling class’s intra-species rivalry is intensified, attracting new kinds of engagement between official and informal organizations.

The activities of these informal coalitions with different mediators, along with inter-network conflicts, appear to be contributing to the shortening of political project life cycles (which cannot sustain stability under the influence of the chains of interactions of these political associations). Furthermore, the “smoothness” of the ongoing historical turn is completely consistent with the tendency to strengthen latent forms of power use and to give the ruling circles even more freedom in defining their

objectives, even though the post-elite type of self-regulation of the ruling class's life activity is currently not entirely congruent with the economic or social transformations in modern societies.

Of course, there are still many unanswered concerns about how political power will be organized in the future due to the structural self-renewal of the ruling class. As of right now, just one comparatively obvious effect is becoming apparent, which is that society, with all of its representative institutions, moral judgments, and aspirations, cannot stop the elites' aspirations and their growing disconnection from the interests of the general populace.

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