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### **TOTALITARIAN CORPORATE CULTURE: MYTH OR REALITY**

*SUMMARY. The expression “totalitarian corporate culture” appears to be a commonly used term. Nevertheless, it combines two different sciences: political and cultural studies. Not accidentally a dispute arises among scholars: is it right to transfer a notion from one scientific area to another? The goal we endeavoured to achieve while writing this paper is to prove that corporate culture turns out to be a manifestation of current totalitarianism, which manifests itself not only in the sphere of politics, but also in the sphere of culture. This paper analyses Russian corporate culture in its infancy: from the 1990s to 2010s. Particular emphasis is put on corporate rituals since they control “office plankton” management. Personal messages, found on various Internet forums, are taken as factual material. Participants of those forums present and comment on some manifestations of corporate fascism, which they personally faced. Spelling and style of the messages under consideration are kept unchanged.*

*KEY WORDS. Totalitarianism, corporate culture, corporate rituals.*

Within the last years a wave of interest to the corporate culture phenomenon is observed. According to recent research conducted by the “HR Digest” experts’ club, almost 80% of Russian respondents consider “corporate culture” a basic notion in the practice of business management [1]. The easiness with which corporate culture takes the form of totalitarianism makes us pay close attention to this phenomenon.

Politology is a traditional science within which the term “totalitarianism” exists. Analyzing the theories of totalitarianism, it is possible to outline its most common features which we took into account when describing the totalitarian character of modern corporate culture. Such common features are typical of all forms of totalitarianism:

1. High concentration of power. Such problems as the power and people in fight against inner and outer enemies, the power and people against the hostile outer environment become actual.

2. Ideologization of the society’s whole life. Ideology includes a series of myths which reflect the power of magic symbols.

3. Existence of a well-organized system of total control over people’s behavior.

4. Totalitarian regimes function according to the principle “everything is prohibited, except for the things ordered by the government”.

5. Formation of a special autocratic type of personality who possesses such qualities as submission as a habit and intolerance to dissent as the norm.

The theory by the Austrian economist Friedrich August von Hayek [2] has become interesting in terms of an opportunity of withdrawing notions “totalitarianism” and “totalitarian” from of the boundaries of politology. The scientist offers a theoretical link: a man with ideals → the society the life of which a leader with ambitions is eager to organize according to a unique plan → and an economic basis. Thus, totalitarianism acquires economical features, which moves us closer to the notion of corporate culture, as economy is one of the reasons of its appearance and existence. To highlight this similarity in Hayek’s theory we will replace the term “state” by the more neutral one “authorities”.

The process of governing develops in a cast-iron sequence according to the universal plan. It supposes that the authorities are not involved into solving a great deal of technical problems. Very soon democratic procedures turn out to be dysfunctional. The plan determines the hierarchy of clearly defined targets, whereas the concentration of power becomes a necessary condition for achievement of these goals.

Juridical and ethical standards are replaced by orders and instructions; the supremacy of law is replaced by the supremacy of power.

From our point of view, it is important that Hayek notes incompatibility of expediency with ethical norms: in other words, everything is moral that helps to achieve purposes, regardless of what means and methods are employed.

But as the authorities cannot physically publish orders on every minor case, the “blank spots” are filled with quasi-principles of quasi-morality.

The term “quasi-” is used because these quasi-principles are meant for junior members of a company and they can be altered in accordance with changing circumstances.

The plan consists of a system of preferences and priorities: it defines what is needed and what is not needed, who is useful and who is of no use. Proclaiming inequality of people and their needs, the plan introduces discrimination which contradicts the principle of equality of all before the law: what is allowed for one person is prohibited for another, according to this plan. The mechanism of the “reverse choice” comes into effect as a result of the absence of moral values and restrictions: “the worst” survive and turn out to be on top, i.e. the man who is completely free of burden of moral habits becomes involved in the dirtiest affairs.

In developed countries the notion “corporate culture” was introduced in the 1920s. Corporate culture performs the functions of adaptation of a company to the environment and identification of its personnel. In this sense, talking about corporate culture, we can speak about a combination of behavioral patterns, symbols, rituals and myths which correspond to the shared values typical of the enterprise. One of the basic functions of corporate culture is forming up the “sense of involvement” via a combination of values, standards and traditions, forming up a sense of “common destiny” among the staff.

A “sense of involvement” is formed through the following actions:

1. Forming up and supporting the image and the system of values of the company via artifacts, mission, history and traditions.

2. Bringing up their personnel in the company loyalty spirit. Corporate culture strives to reach stability and, accordingly, non-critical perception, which must be shared by the majority of the personnel.

3. Forming up and control of behavioral patterns typical of a company. Action mechanisms of corporate culture “sort out” behavioral styles which do not correspond to the essence and spirit of a company.

This is the function of forming up a sense of involvement, which is one of the most important reasons of totalitarianism evidence in corporate culture. Desire to belong to a group refers to one of man’s basic needs. This need is realized by means of a person’s search in modern culture with its religious and social-hierarchic fuzziness. Thus, the found group acquires a specific value in man’s consciousness, and he is ready to put up with his personal freedom limitation for the feeling of involvement (especially if this feeling is supported by rituals and financial reward).

In the culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such a phenomenon as mass society appears, i.e. the society that suppresses the man’s personality and alters him to its needs. Mass society ingenerates mass culture, claiming for totality in its mass nature. Tendency to idolization, absence of one’s own opinion, tendency to create false myths can be regarded as mass culture characteristics [3]. Comparing these characteristics to the ones of totalitarianism, we can observe their considerable likeness. Mass culture is total and passes this property to corporate culture. Corporate culture comprises practically all areas of human activity, from etiquette to personnel’s leisure time. The will of the director and favorable conditions can transform totality into totalitarianism.

The first sign of a totalitarian company is intense ideological brainwashing of the personnel similar to the principles of political propaganda and religious sermon, in which the following mythologems are used: celebrities, holy spirit, etc. Another sign is learning by heart corporate anthems, oaths and missions.

As for its essence, both the corporate oath and corporate anthem are special forms of a ritual, i.e. a repeated action, procedure, having a symbolic meaning. The applied sense of the ritual is the following: it emotionally influences the participants, affects their unconscious and forms the feeling of unity, i.e. it creates a psychological state for separate participants and for the whole company. The essence of a company’s rituals and symbols is in translation of traditions, values and approved behaviour.

The corporate anthem is a song used by the company; the anthem makes it possible to instill the ideology of the company through emotional impact into corporate events, influencing thoughts and moods of the group, [4]. The anthem is performed at official events, but some companies begin and end every working day with the corporate anthem.

Since corporate culture is a part of mass culture, it is rooted in a wide symbolic context created by commercial art. Authors include images and symbols familiar to potential singers into texts of corporate anthems. Let us take a passage from the Anthem devoted to the tenth anniversary of the Consultant Plus all-Russian company [5]:

*Though we are not angels, we are just consultants,  
The saint corporate spirit unites us!*

In the text of this anthem we can observe a tendency typical of many corporate cultures — a tendency to sacralization of the Corporation status; and belonging to the Corporation is concerned as a symbol of selectness.

A forced team-building, compulsory attendance of trainings and seminars is another reason to blame the company for totalitarian manners.

One of the employers' hobbies is ontopsychology (founded by A.Menegetty). Ontopsychology courses are attended by leaders and the most promising personnel members are sent there, as a rule, by order. "According to Menegetty's theory, the leader has a right to be indifferent to all: subjects, clients, business-partners, even to his wife and children. If something (or somebody) starts interfering with the leader, it (he/she) should be rejected without compassion. It resembles a totalitarian sect whose purpose is to take the man out of his vital environment" [6].

All the above-mentioned statements are parts of quite a destructive worldview, which employers make their employees accept. The wife of one of the employees of a Yekaterinburg company, where ontopsychology is propagated, says: "My husband regularly attended trainings. He began looking like a zombie, and finally he left us (me and our little son), as we interfered with him, while he, as he said, was trying "to earn money". He told us that "business was number one on his list of priorities and we took the second position".

Actually, we speak about the inclination of corporate culture to form the opposition "own-strange". If by the term "strange" a company means not just "a man from outside" but "an enemy", corporate culture turns into totalitarianism.

In 2004, some corporate statements used by the "Pyatyerochka" company, appeared on the Internet. Here are some extracts from them:

*[...] Most of our time we spend at work or with thoughts about work. We were chosen to realize this great Target. We possess a unique instrument called the Pyramid of correspondence. Enemies constantly try to demolish the Pyramid of correspondence. To be ready for defense is an objective necessity.*

Some employers arrange Orwellian "five-minute breaks of hatred" towards the competitor companies.

Several years ago an amateur video was published on the Internet. In the video the employees of some company cried out: "The Euroset Company is lousy, the Svyaznoy Company is super!" with their hands up, their state resembling a state of religious ecstasy.

Total surveillance of each employee's action is a visiting card of a totalitarian company, possibly causing the most irritation of the personnel. A special department read e-mail messages, analyze the internet-traffic, the security service equip the offices with bugs and video cameras.

According to the research carried out by the Superjob portal specialists, 28% of Russian employers read corporate e-mail communication of their employees. In 49% of companies they open and check e-mail messages, 7% of the employers read e-mails by Internet-messengers, 3% — by Skype [7].

According to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, each citizen has a right to privacy. Private information must not be gathered, stored, used or spread without

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a person's consent. But many directors think that there cannot be anything personal at work. That is why, installing video cameras in offices, they often do not ask for their employees' consent or never inform them about video surveillance at work. Specialists pay their attention to the fact that last year the volume of orders from private firms and companies for video surveillance systems considerably increased. Hence a question arises: why are office employees ready to agree with the fact that the employer a priori suspects them of all sins and totally controls their lives? Analyzing data of various Internet forums, we came to the conclusion that the most popular explanation to this phenomenon is a high salary. The quasi-morality, spoken about by F. Hayek, makes it possible to prefer prosperity, stability or business reputation of the company to one's personal freedom.

One of the forum visitors sincerely explains: "The most important is to know what should be done not to lose daily bread".

At a training course a shocking explanation was given by the shop-assistant Dmitry: "In the company I worked for, it was typical to check out the employees' behavior — during a whole day one employee was secretly watched for with the help of all means — video cameras, bugging, they watched what was going on on the computer and that was OK, at first it shocked, then everybody got used to it somehow".

While writing this article, we faced another fact: the majority of the messages concerning the problem of corporate culture date back to 2000-2007, whereas in private talks we constantly heard complaints about uncontrollable oppression on the part of the executive team in different companies. The explanation of this "nonsense" is the influence of totalitarian corporate culture.

Within the past years in Russia developed a tendency to fire company employees who in the virtual world are too honest about their work and their executive team.

The relative transparency of the Internet let the employers find out "chatter boxes" easily.

"I worked for one of the largest mass media companies", says the journalist Sergey Surganov. "Our salary was delayed, and one of our employees blurted it out on the Internet. He was immediately tracked down by the security service and fired at once" [8].

Some company directors, alongside security departments, form a network of "voluntary assistants" who eavesdrop on their co-workers' conversations and provide the authorities with this information. This is the way the "office authorities" try to keep abreast of the events happening in the "office society". In totalitarian corporate culture the moral aspect of eavesdropping is not considered either by the executive team or by the personnel as a serious problem. In many American and European companies various forms of reports to firm directors on observed violations have been developed. One of the employees of a foreign company writes: "I don't tell on people, I know the forms of report".

Russian business gradually adopts foreign experience on implementation of the inter-corporation information system. The employer can purposely push the employees to whistleblowing. The system of motivation of the personnel is built the way that

it would be profitable for a person to snitch. Sergey, a programmer, says: "I worked for a long time for the company where it was normal to snitch. If you didn't snitch (inform) in time you could be fined!"

An important sign of corporate culture totalitarianism is the presence of a taboo system. It would be unreasonable to consider all prohibitions existing in corporate culture as demonstration of totalitarianism, though. Any company must use not only a bonus system, but also a system of sanctions for its successful development. Nevertheless, the company's management team often implement the principle: "everything is prohibited apart from the things ordered by the management team".

One of the widespread taboos is the dress code. Employees wearing suits inspire clients' respect. But sometimes employers consider clothes as demonstration of devotion to a company. Valery, a system administrator writes: "We are prohibited to be dressed in red. The combination of red and white is specially punished. The matter is that these two colours are general corporate colours of our main competitor. The height of devotion is wearing clothes of chocolate and beige shades — the colours of our company". Absurdity of some prohibitions is outrageous. Anna, an office-manager says: "[...] the company demanded not just a costume. The blouses had to be of the same colour shade as the reception hall".

Similar situations might be considered as pleasant mistakes, if people were not fined or fired for them. According to the enquiry held by the Research Center of the SuperJob.ru recruiting portal, among 1,000 respondents from seven regions of the country, office workers face prohibitions which can be compared to the situation when potential employees are selected according to their sign of the zodiac. For example, there is a prohibition to open the blinds, for "in such case they, according to Feng Shui, can "destroy" life energy".

Most of famous totalitarian cultures search for an enemy in the image of representatives of different nationalities. Today people of a "wrong" nationality are supposed to be *personae non grata* in many companies. "We don't employ migrants", says Michael, a specialist of the personnel department of one of the companies. Our Director General treats them with disdain and often says: "No migrants in the company!"

Taboos for physical and social-demographic peculiarities (refusal to employ people of an improper age, sex, sexual orientation, etc.), propagated in some corporations, are used to defend the ideal image of the employee invented by companies. General features of this ideal are youth and physical health. In some firms employees of personnel departments confess that they do not hire plump people, as "obesity is a sign of unhealthiness" [9].

If corporate culture has tendencies to be totalitarian, it is not limited by a tendency to control man's working time. Employers have a temptation to interfere with personal lives of employees "according to their own wish". As the Headhunter has found out, for the majority of people corporate obligation is the most terrible thing that might happen at work [10]. Maria, a manager writes: "Our company practices obligatory parties in the middle of the week out of town till at least 11 p.m. (you are

not allowed to leave!), more often such parties last till 3-4 a.m. (despite all this, nobody cancels the work day at 10 a.m. the next day)".

Thus, striving to win 100% loyalty of the personnel and security, many companies turn into totalitarian sects. Employees themselves use a more offensive term: "corporate fascism". It is totalitarianism when the managing team violates not only moral but also legal norms and laws. Everything that serves the targets set by the managing team is considered moral. The notion of privacy diminishes and gradually disappears. Disagreement with the rules becomes disagreement with the managing team. Freedom of thought and speech lose their significance. A new corporate person, the person whose conscience is replaced by the blind loyalty to their companies, is being formed.

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