



Contribution of the Institutions of the Regional Political System to the Preservation of the Level and Quality of Life of the Population in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic (The Case Study of the Trans-Baikal Territory)

Yulia Matafonova¹ 
Tatyana Gordeeva² 

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Abstract: *The study of the activities of regional authorities to preserve the level and quality of life of the population in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic acquires scientific value due to the special conditions in which the regional community and the regional political institutions were placed.*

The article analyzes the impact of the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic on the activities of the institutions of the regional political system to preserve the level and quality of life of the population within a particular subject of the Russian Federation – the Trans-Baikal Territory. As the main research method, a dichotomous assessment of the data obtained as a result of an expert survey in the fall of 2021 is used. The experts were the heads and specialists of the public authorities of the region and local authorities.

The contribution of the institutions of the regional political system to the preservation of the level and quality of life of the population is considered through the categories of “social efficiency” and “level of administration”. As a result of the study, we defined the pandemic has a negative impact on the functioning of the institutions of the regional political system in the field of maintaining the level and quality of life of the population. The revealed trends do not allow us to consider the regional political system sufficiently effective and capable of providing the basic conditions for the sustainable development of the region.

1. INTRODUCTION

The conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic have become a test for both population and regional political systems. According to experts and researchers, the difficulties faced by regional authorities are diverse. Restrictions imposed during the pandemic caused many negative socio-economic consequences (reduced income, loss of work, restriction in the sphere of entrepreneurial activity) that in its turn led to a decrease in the level and quality of life. Most often, a reduction of availability of general education (forced expenses of families to provide school-children with computer equipment or means of communication) (Osipov, 2020, p. 35), a shortage of social and medical services (Mau, 2020, p. 146), a negative impact of isolation on psychological health, etc. are seen by Russian researchers as social risks caused by the pandemic. The works of foreign scientists include the similar negative consequences associated with the violation of the standard conditions of social functioning with changes in social and psychological circumstances (Qiu, 2020, p. 1). On the other hand, representatives of social and political sciences note that the conditions of the pandemic contributed to checking the power institutions' ability to make timely decisions aimed at minimizing the crisis consequences and meeting the vital needs of citizens (Zhade, 2021, p. 736).

¹ Trans-Baikal State University, Chita, Russia

² Trans-Baikal State University, Chita, Russia

The level and quality of life are not only complex socio-economic indicators measured in statistical data but also indicators determined through the population's perception and evaluation of its living conditions. While conducting a study of a level and quality of life, it is necessary to take into account not only objective factors (the dynamics of the money income level and expenditures of population, the subsistence level, health status, availability of material resources, work, etc.) but also subjective factors related to the perception of opportunities by individuals and the degree of satisfaction with the living conditions. Therefore, the activities of public authorities (including the regional level) should be evaluated from the point of view of their existence justification (execution of the functions assigned to them) and implementation of certain activities. In this article, we consider the area associated with the preservation of the level and quality of life of the population within the region (the Trans-Baikal Territory) in the context of the pandemic.

The purpose of the article is to identify the effectiveness of the activities of the regional authorities in the Trans-Baikal Territory in the sphere of preserving the level and quality of life of the population in the context of the pandemic, using a dichotomous assessment of the expert survey data.

The study hypothesized that the conditions of the pandemic have a negative impact on the functioning of regional political systems and lead to a decrease in the effectiveness of the functions assigned to them.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A significant amount of modern research is devoted to the study of the dynamics of the level and quality of life and the functioning of authorities (including the regional level) in the conditions of uncertainty that have developed under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. M.V. Shakleina, M.I. Volkova, K.I. Shaklein, S.R. Yakiro (Shakleina, 2020, p. 137-138), O. Kozlova focuses on the problems of measuring the level and quality of life and the need for a combination of objective and subjective indicators. A., Gladkova T. V., Makarova M. N., Tukhtarova E. Kh. (Kozlova, 2015, p. 281-282). F.D. Algahtani, S.-u.-N. Hassan, B. Alsaif, R. Zrieq revealed the negative impact of the pandemic on predictors of the level and quality of life-based on regression analysis of data. The authors concluded that in the crisis conditions under consideration, the population needs public and institutional support (Algahtani, 2021, p. 10).

The assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social and political processes at the level of separate regions is also widely presented in research papers. Dorothee Allain-Dupre, Isabelle Chatry, Antoine Kornprobst and Maria-Varinia Michalun underline the asymmetry of the impact of the pandemic crisis on the regions, the focus on its territorial dimension and emphasize the special role of the authorities of subnational territorial units (regions, constituent units of the federation) in taking measures to control negative consequences and maintaining the functioning of the health care system, social services, and regional economy (OECD, 2020, November 10). Spatial and managerial aspects of the pandemic are presented in the article by D. McCoy. Professor David McCoy writes about the need to develop a managerial strategy, where he identifies 3 key aspects of the activities of authorities: 1) Dealing with the disease; 2) Managing the health system; 3) Planning for the social and economic impacts of the crisis (McCoy, 2020). The priority of managing the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic at the level of political and territorial entities is noted by Caroline Chang, Scott Moore and Ali Wyne. They point out that at the national level, the United States did not really cope well with the pandemic, but at the state level, there are numerous examples of managerial practices to follow (Chang, 2020).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. The Empirical Base of the Study

The collection of empirical data was carried out using:

- 1) the online survey on the Online Test Pad platform <https://onlinetestpad.com/hoy6ugd7p-kzxm>. The online survey was conducted in two stages: the first stage – from October to November 2020, and the second stage – from June to August 2021. 385 respondents took part in the survey;
- 2) in the expert survey conducted in November – December 2021 the number of experts was 79 persons: 10 of which were representatives of the executive regional authorities, 7 – legislative, and 62 – representatives of local authorities.

The answers of the respondents and experts were processed using the SPSS statistics program.

3.2. The Method of Dichotomous Assessment

This method of expert assessment is based on determining the evaluation of the indicator taking into account the priority (of direction, scope, tasks, results). It must be recognized that the application of this method introduces certain simplifications into the formulation of a research problem. Nevertheless, the dichotomous approach allows us to obtain necessary data about the problem, its condition, initial estimates and results to test the hypothesis and develop further actions.

The analysis is based on the construction of a goal tree – a hierarchical breakdown of the main goal – the estimated indicator – the contribution of the regional political system institutions to sub-goals - indicators that determine the top assessment. They, in turn, are also divided into two components, etc. (Fig. 1).

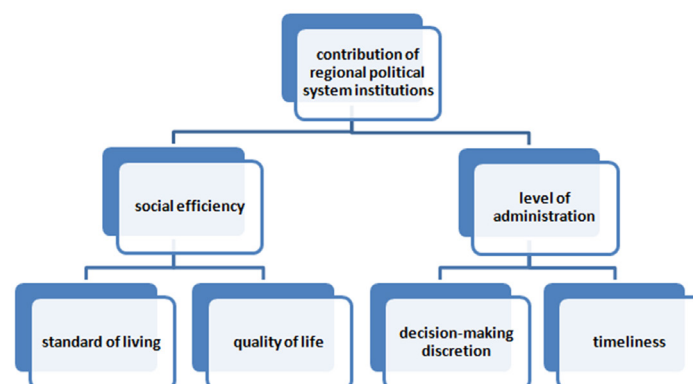


Figure 1. Hierarchical breakdown of the main goal – the estimated indicator

Source: Own research

In order to obtain an aggregated assessment of the contribution of the regional political system institutions to the preservation of the level and quality of life of the population, we took the directions of “social efficiency” and “level of administration” as the second level elements. To evaluate each of them, we defined the elements of the third level.

To evaluate social effectiveness, we take two variables: “standard of living” and “quality of life”. The validity of using these indicators as variables within the scope of the task and the

capabilities of the assessment methodology used is fully justified, since the indicators of the level and quality of life are comparative in their initial content, and in terms of the number of components and assessment methods (the use of quantitative and qualitative assessments) they are different and the result of their assessment is not always unidirectional.

The standard of living is a “numerical indicator” of the authorities’ activity, and the quality of life is an integral representation of subjective indicators, consisting of assessments of satisfaction with various spheres of life, including emotional assessments and objective ones – the degree and conditions of satisfaction with a wide range of material and non-material (spiritual) needs.

To assess the indicator “level of administration”, we identified the variables “decision-making discretion” and “timeliness” which were evaluated as the average value of expert responses.

Splitting into two elements for each indicator at all levels, except the top one, simplified the process of evaluation – convolution of estimates-indicators from the bottom to the top.

The dichotomous approach allowed us to build assessment matrices based on the priorities chosen by experts. When constructing the matrices for the evaluation of individual indicators, we took into account the monotonicity rule (the left estimate cannot be greater than the right one, and the value of the estimates increases from the lower left corner to the right).

With the help of the prepared evaluation matrices, the averaged expert assessments obtained made it possible to gradually evaluate the lower rows of the indicator elements at first, then the indicators of the next level, and as a result – to obtain an aggregated assessment.

4. RESULTS

As a result, we have formed three matrices to assess the priority and the “result” of the selected indicators. The first one is to assess the social efficiency of the institutions of the regional political system. The second matrix is to assess the level of administration. The third matrix is integral – it reflects the contribution of the institutions of the regional political system in the chosen directions, and shows the impact on the established variables.

For example, let’s consider the conditions for the formation of one of the matrices – the third one, which determines the final integral assessment (the rest are done by analogy, taking into account the indicators and the priority). To assess the contribution of the regional political system institutions, we will consider ensuring social efficiency as a priority.

While filling in the matrix, we will take into account the following provisions:

- 1) with an unsatisfactory assessment of both indicators, the contribution of the institutions of the regional political system is assessed as unsatisfactory;
- 2) with an increase in social efficiency ratings and lower assessments of the level of administration, priority is given to the efficiency, i.e. with good assessments of the level of social efficiency and an unsatisfactory/satisfactory assessment of the level of administration, the assessment of the “contribution” is satisfactory or good;
- 3) similarly, with an increase in assessments of the level of administration and lower assessments of social efficiency, priority is given to this indicator and the “contribution” as a whole is assessed only as satisfactory with a negative trend;

- 4) even with a high assessment of the level of administration, but a satisfactory and good assessment of social efficiency, power institutions of the regional political system will not receive an excellent assessment.

To assess the lower-level variables, we took answers to the questionnaires of the surveys conducted: among the population of the Trans-Baikal Territory and an expert survey, where state and municipal employees participated as experts.

So, we assessed the “quality of life” through the average responses to questions about the evaluation of the social sphere development (2,8548) and the security evaluation (2,8197). Interpreting these data taking into account the scale of responses (they shift to “unsatisfactory”), it is impossible, in our opinion, to talk about an ordinary “satisfactory” assessment. We will consider it as a trend towards a decrease in the quality of life.

To assess the “standard of living”, we took answers to questions about changes in the level of income (50% of respondents said that income has not changed significantly, 27.8% indicated a decrease in income, 5% said that income has increased slightly since there was support from the state) and an evaluation of economic policy (the average estimate is 2,931). In this case, we can designate the state as a “stable” one.

The economic component – the standard of living – is easier to regulate and ensure than the quality of life, which, as has already been mentioned, is more subjective.

The intersection of the lower-level estimates gives us the value of the indicator for social efficiency. If we choose the standard of living as a priority, then the social efficiency of the institutions of the regional political system can be estimated at 2.884 (satisfactory) (Table 1).

Table 1. Matrix with the results of assessing the social efficiency of the regional political system institutions of the Trans-Baikal Territory

Great	4		4	5	5
Good	3		4	4	4
Satisfactory	3		3	3	4
2,931	3	(2.884)			
Unsatisfactory	2	2	2	3	3
Standard of living/Quality of life	Unsatisfactory	2.837	Satisfactory	Good	Great

Source: Own research

Assessing the level of administration – in fact, the effectiveness of the “official” activities of the regional authorities, we considered two variables that determine this indicator in the context of the research task: discretion in making decisions and timeliness.

In the case of crisis situations, in particular pandemics, in our opinion, decision-making time becomes a priority. The direct result depends on the timeliness of decisions and their implementation: the number of infected, sick people, and the level of provision with the necessary funds. Of course, decision-making discretion of regional authorities in general, and especially in the context of a pandemic, is of priority importance, since the situations in separate regions are different and measures should be taken according to the development of events with respect to regional specifics.

To assess this variable, we took the average value of experts' answers to the questions about decision-making discretion in crisis conditions by regional authorities (3,608) and the effectiveness of legislative practice during the pandemic (3,515). And the average result of the answers to the question about the timeliness of making necessary decisions became a direct assessment of this variable (3,972). Both indicators are quite close to the "good" rating. Nevertheless, in crisis situations, according to experts, decision-making time has a priority. Taking this fact into account, we assign "good" (3,744) (Table 2.) to the indicator of "level of administration".

Table 2. Matrix with the results of the assessment of the level of administration for the regional political system in the Trans-Baikal Territory

Great	4	4		4	5
Good	3	3		4	5
3.515	3		Good (3.744)		
Satisfactory	2	3		3	4
Unsatisfactory	2	3	3	3	3
Discretion/Timeliness	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	3.972	Good	Great

Source: Own research

The final stage of assessing the contribution of the regional political system institutions (the regional authorities) is to combine the two results obtained: a satisfactory assessment of social efficiency and a good assessment of the level of administration. It is the choice of priority that is of particular importance here. The question of priority, as a scientific or research task, is debatable. In practical terms, the further development of the situation and possible adjustments depend on the priority chosen by the experts (Table 3.).

Table 3. Integral matrix for assessing the contribution of the regional political system institutions of the Trans-Baikal Territory to the studied indicators (directions)

Great	4		4	5	5
Good	3		4	4	4
Satisfactory	3		3	3	4
2.884		3			
Unsatisfactory	2		2	3	3
Social efficiency/Level of administration	Unsatisfactory	3.744	Satisfactory	Good	Great

Source: Own research

As a result, we state that taking into account the priority of social efficiency in relation to the level of administration, the contribution of the regional political system institutions of the Trans-Baikal Territory to the preservation of the level and quality of life of the population can only be assessed satisfactorily with a negative trend. The data obtained do not allow us to consider the regional political system as sufficiently effective one in the sphere of providing the basic conditions for the sustainable development of the region.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Discuss future and emerging trends. The results of this study allow us to talk about the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic conditions on both the level and quality of life of the population within the study region – the Trans-Baikal Territory and on the functioning of regional authorities. Despite the fact that the institutional framework of political systems is more resistant to various kinds of disturbing influences, the analysis of the results of the surveys conducted

using the dichotomous method allowed us to establish a decrease in the level of social efficiency of the authorities in the conditions of Coronavirus infection and to assess the degree of fulfillment of the functions assigned to the institutions of the regional political system as “satisfactory”. Such a trend of reducing the social efficiency of regional authorities in a crisis situation is natural and ordinary not only for the subjects of the Russian Federation but also for the political-territorial entities of many other states.

Further research will be aimed at detailing the results obtained and establishing a correlation between the indicators of the level and quality of life of the population within the region and the stability of the regional political system.

6. CONCLUSION

The dichotomous analysis used in this article as the main method, despite some simplifications, allowed us to identify trends in the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic conditions on the institutions of the regional political system within the Trans-Baikal Territory and assess their contribution to maintaining the level and quality of life of the population.

The article is based on empirical data obtained through a survey of the population of the Trans-Baikal Territory and an expert survey. Therefore, the obtained results, first of all, reflect the subjective component of the categories “standard and quality of life” – they show the perception of socio-political situation in the region by the population and experts, their assessment of the contribution of the authorities to maintaining the level and quality of life. In this article, we did not set the task of correlating the indicators of official statistics with the results of the conducted surveys. It is a guideline for future studies.

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