



Insulting a Public Authority: Issues of Legal Regulation, Qualification and Differentiation of Criminal Liability

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Abstract

Introduction: the article analyzes provisions of Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation stipulating criminal liability for insulting a public authority, as well as the practice of their application, the role and significance of these norms in ensuring the constitutional right to protect the honor and dignity of the individual, the established management procedure, and state security. *Purpose:* based on the analysis of problems of legislative consolidation and definition of the crime elements provided for in Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and the practice of applying this article to develop proposals for improving the provisions of criminal legislation in this area. *Methods:* methods of dialectical cognition, induction, deduction, analysis, synthesis, interpretation of legal norms, legal-dogmatic, structural-logical, systematic methods, etc. *Results:* the author determines gaps and shortcomings in the description of elements of the crime related to insulting a public authority that lead to their different understanding and application both in the scientific community and judicial practice. Incomplete application of provisions of Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation in practice is noted due to the inaccurate identification of crime elements, primarily public insult, a lack of differentiation of liability for insulting a public authority. The absence of proportionate and systemic links between this article and other related and similar types of crimes and administrative offenses is revealed. *Conclusions:* based on the study results, the author proposes a new version of Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation containing a detailed description of elements of the crime under consideration and differentiating criminal liability for insulting a representative of power, depending on whether the crime has been committed in public or using official conduct, as well as clarified and supplemented sanctions.

Key words: insult; representative of authority; publicity; corpus delicti; punishment; differentiation of criminal responsibility.

5.1.4. Criminal law sciences.

For citation: Sereda S.P. Insulting a public authority: issues of legal regulation, qualification and differentiation of criminal liability. *Penitentiary Science*, 2026, vol. 20, no. 1 (73), pp. 54–61. doi 10.46741/2686-9764.2026.73.1.007.

Introduction

The right to defend honor, dignity and good name is an inviolable right of every person, which is recognized and guaranteed in Part 1 of Article 23 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation. Similar provisions are enshrined in generally recognized international documents, for example, in Article 12 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Recognition of dignity is inherent in all people and is the basis of freedom, justice and universal peace.

At the same time, Part 1 of Article 21 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation establishes that it is the state that is obliged to protect the dignity of the individual regardless of his/her position in society.

Research

Criminal law and criminal liability are effective means of protecting the person's honor, dignity and good name, including from insults. However, the current version of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation does not contain a general definition of such a crime as insulting and does not provide for criminal liability for insulting any person. The original version of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation recognized insulting any person as one of the crimes against the person and established criminal liability for its commission (Article 130). However, in accordance with the federal law No. 420-FZ of December 7, 2011, this article and this crime were excluded from the code, that is, the socially dangerous act in question was decriminalized. Experts are not unanimous in the assessment of such a drastic change in the provisions of criminal law on insults. Positive [1; 2] and negative [3-7] estimates indicate a lack of a unified approach to understanding and assessing public danger of such an act as insulting a person. At the same time, it should be noted that a negative attitude towards decriminalization of insults in Russian criminal law still prevails among scientists and specialists.

The exclusion of Article 130 from the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, which provided for the general composition of the insult, is certainly controversial. At the same time, the current version stipulates criminal liability for special types of insults against certain categories of persons, namely: insulting a government official (Article 319), insulting a serviceman (Article 336), contempt of court expressed in in-

sulting participants in the trial, a judge, a juror, or another person involved in the administration of justice (Article 297). The legislator excludes a general composition of the insult from the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, while preserving and even expanding special compositions. This approach is criticized by some scientists [8]. On the one hand, the constitutional principle of equality of all before the law and the court is violated. People who are not endowed with authority, who are not representatives of the authorities, participants in court proceedings, military personnel who are not involved in the administration of justice, are not entitled to criminal law protection of their honor and dignity from insults. They can only rely on civil and administrative legal means to protect their honor and dignity from insults. Insulting an ordinary person is an administrative offense and entails not criminal, but only administrative responsibility in accordance with Article 5.61 of the Administrative Code of the Russian Federation.

On the other hand, the preservation of criminal liability in the current version of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation for insulting a public authority and other special types of insults is, in our opinion, justified since the existing special insulting structures are based not just on the special status and special characteristics of the victim, but on special social relations that are protected by these special structures. Previously existing in Article 130 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, the general composition of the insult was fixed in Chapter 17 of Section VII, which indicated that the immediate main object of the encroachment by this crime was social relations related to ensuring and protecting the honor and dignity of the individual, belonging to a broader group of relations related to ensuring and protecting the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual. In turn, insulting a representative of the government, the responsibility for which is provided by Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation differs significantly from the previously existing general composition of insults for the main direct object of encroachment. This is indicated by the location of this article not in section VII on crimes against the person, but in Chapter 32 of Section X of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, which

provides for liability for crimes against state power, namely against the order of government. Insulting a representative of authority primarily encroaches not on the honor and dignity of a particular person endowed with authority, but on the authority of which this person is a representative. According to Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, insulting a representative of the government is a crime only if the insult occurs at the moment when the representative of the government performs his/her official duties or if the insult occurs in connection with their performance. If insulting a public authority has nothing to do with the performance of his/her duties and concerns only his/her personality, affects only his/her honor and dignity as an ordinary person, there is no *corpus delicti* provided for in Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. Such an insult can only be qualified as an administrative offense under Article 5.61 of the Administrative Code of the Russian Federation.

In this regard, the special offense provided for in Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, related to insults of a public authority, has significant differences from the previous general composition of Article 130 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. These differences relate not only to the status of the victim, but also to the object, and even the objective side of the crime. The main direct object of the crime in Article 319 is public relations related to the normal legal order of management of society by law enforcement, regulatory and other public authorities, both state and municipal, based on respect for government officials during or in connection with the exercise of their administrative powers in relation to persons who are not dependent on them. Relations related to the protection of the honor and dignity of a representative of power as an ordinary person are only an additional, albeit mandatory object of crime, responsibility for which is provided for in Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.

In this regard, public danger of insulting a representative of authority, as well as other special forms of insult, exceeds public danger of insulting an ordinary person, which justifies criminalization of the act provided for in Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. The legislator emphasized precisely

higher public danger of special types of insults, including insults to a representative of the government, by preserving and consolidating these types of crimes in the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. The establishment and maintenance of criminal liability for insulting a public authority performing his/her duties is especially relevant at the present time, when internal and external threats against the security of the Russian state and society are constantly growing. At the same time, some experts note systematic work to undermine confidence in law enforcement and other public authorities and local governments, including in the media, using modern information technologies [9].

In such circumstances, the presence of Article 319 in the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, which provides for criminal liability for insulting the authorities, is justified and necessary. However, according to this article, only a public insult of a government official is criminalized. Non-public insult does not constitute a crime and is only an administrative offense that falls under Article 5.61 of the Administrative Code of the Russian Federation. In our opinion, such an approach is not correct, since it does not take into account the nature and degree of public danger of non-public insults to a representative of power received during or in connection with the exercise of powers. The crime encroaches not only on the honor and dignity of the individual, but primarily on the established order of state and municipal administration, and hence on the security of the state and society. By intentionally insulting a public authority, regardless of whether it happens publicly or not, the guilty person is in fact deliberately insulting the current state or municipal authorities, specific law enforcement, regulatory and other bodies. The presence of only administrative liability in current legislation for such non-public actions does not take into account their high public danger.

We should also pay attention to the inconsistency of the legislator in determining the nature and degree of liability for the crime provided for in Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, in determining its punishability, which, in our opinion, also does not correspond to the nature and degree of public danger of this crime. So, if we compare sanctions of the current Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the

Russian Federation and the previously existing Article 130 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, we can see that there is no significant difference in the punitive potential of the sanctions. This does not correspond to the difference in the nature and degree of public danger between these acts, which, among other things, explains decriminalization of the general offense (Article 130 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) as less socially dangerous and maintaining criminal liability for insulting a public authority (Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) as a more socially dangerous act. As well as the elements of crimes in the previously valid Article 130 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, the act in the current Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation is a crime of minor gravity. There is no punishment in the form of imprisonment in the sanctions of these articles, which cannot be considered correct. Moreover, the alternative sanctions of the previously existing Article 130 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation provided for more severe types and amounts of punishments than the sanction of the current Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. Part 2 of Article 130 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation stipulated a greater sum of a fine, as well as restriction of freedom. The most severe punishment in Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation is correctional labor. In our opinion, this situation indicates the legislator's inconsistency in determining types and amounts of punishments for insulting a public authority in Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and determines the need to tighten sanctions of this article. What is more, the size of a fine provided for in this article is significantly less than the amount of administrative punishment in the form of a fine provided for qualified administrative offenses in parts 3-5 of Article 5.61 of the Administrative Code of the Russian Federation. Such a discrepancy between the sanctions and the nature and degree of public danger of the acts in question indicates a violation of the principle of differentiation of legal liability for administrative offenses and crimes related to personal insult. On the one hand, the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation does not stipulate criminal liability for insulting a government official not

in public, and on the other, the Administrative Code of the Russian Federation does not fix a qualified composition of an administrative offense in Article 5.61 and other articles related solely to insulting a public authority.

To understand the prevalence and frequency of commission of crimes under consideration, it is necessary to refer to official judicial statistics. Thus, according to official statistical information posted on the website of the Judicial Department of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, 8,616 people (1.1% of all convicts) were convicted under Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation in 2011, 7,821 (1%, respectively) in 2012, 7,874 (1%) in 2013, 8,859 (1.2 %) in 2014, 7,830 (1%) in 2015, 10,084 (1.4%) in 2016, 10,339 (1.5%) in 2017, 10,155 (1.5%) in 2018, 9,194 (1.5%) in 2019, 8,741 (1.6%) in 2020, 6,786 (1.2%) in 2021, 4,621 (0.8%) in 2022, 3,616 (0.7%) in 2023, and 2,054 (0.4 %) in 2024 [10]. At the same time, in 2011, 2,812 people (0.4%) were convicted under Article 130 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation [10].

Statistics show a positive trend in the number of people convicted under Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. In 2011–2024, the number of persons convicted annually under Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation reduced fourfold: from 8,616 to 2,054 people. During this period, the share of those convicted under Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation in the total number of all convicts decreased significantly: from 1.1% in 2011 to 0.4% in 2024. At the same time, despite a serious increase in the number of those convicted under Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation in 2016–2019, however, the downward trend in the number of people convicted of this crime should generally be recognized as stable. In particular, the presented statistical data may indirectly indicate a decrease in the number of crimes committed under Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. It should also be noted that at the time of the decriminalization of a general corpus delicti (Article 130 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) in 2011, the number of people convicted under this article was more than three times less than those convicted of insulting a government official under Article 319 of the

Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. Undoubtedly, such statistics justified preservation of criminal liability for insulting a government official, as they indicated a greater prevalence of this crime and its greater public danger.

At the same time, the official statistics on criminal prosecution and conviction of perpetrators under Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation do not reflect the total number of socially dangerous acts related to insulting public authorities. The study of materials of specific criminal cases and court verdicts issued under Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation shows that the application of this article in practice is limited. This is associated, in our opinion, with the fact that the insult of a public authority is formulated in Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation quite broadly, does not contain necessary clarifications and definitions of the main features. In addition, Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation does not contain qualified compositions of insulting a government official that would reveal certain features and aspects of this crime and allow practical authorities to correctly understand and apply this criminal law norm. As a result, in practice, Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation is mainly applied in obvious cases involving public insults of government officials during direct performance of their official duties. In this case, most often insulting a public authority is actually committed and qualified by a combination of crimes involving the use of violence against a representative of the government (Article 318 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). Convictions for publicly insulting a public official committed using information and telecommunications networks, including the Internet, are rare in judicial practice and in court verdicts.

So, for example, in accordance with the verdict of the Nurlatsky District Court of the Republic of Tatarstan of November 27, 2024 in case No. 1-98/2024, the defendant was found guilty of committing crimes under Part 1 of articles 318, 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, namely for repeated verbal insults of a juvenile officer in the presence of civilians and using violence. Obscene words humiliated officer's honor and dignity as a public authority performing his official duties [11]. A similar

verdict was issued by the Salavatsky City Court of the Republic of Bashkortostan on December 19, 2023 in case No. 1-412/2023. The defendant was found guilty of committing crimes under Article 319 and Part 1 of Article 318 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation for having insulted an inspector in the presence of other citizens and having used violence against the representative of public authority [12]. Most convictions issued by the courts under Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation have a similar description of criminal cases. Sentences imposed for public insults of public authorities on the Internet and in the media are rare. However, this is not due to the absence of such socially dangerous acts in practice, but to the incomplete and extremely cautious application of Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, which in turn is due to the imperfection of this rule.

In accordance with the explanations of the Plenum of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation No. 14 of June 1, 2023 "On certain issues of judicial practice in criminal cases of crimes provided for in articles 317, 318, 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation", a mandatory sign of the publicity of insulting a public authority in Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation can be expressed both in the fact that an offensive statement or other expression of insult is committed both in the presence of the victim him/herself and (or) other people, and by posting offensive information in the media, on the Internet (forums, blogs, etc.) accessible to a wide range of people. However, as we have already noted, even with this unequivocal explanation from the highest court of Russia, the broad meaning of the sign of publicity in Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation is not fully applied in practice, a significant number of such socially dangerous acts committed on the Internet are ignored. Meanwhile, the facts of insulting representatives may be part of a large-scale targeted criminal activity related to the spread of criminal subculture and disinformation. As some experts rightly point out, the dissemination of such ideologies is often carried out through Internet platforms and mass media, which undermines public safety [13, p. 83].

The disposition of Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation is, in our

opinion, imperfect, since it does not contain a complete and sufficient description and definition of not only the sign of publicity, but also other mandatory elements of the crime related to insulting a public authority. Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation only identifies, but does not disclose, key terms, such as insult, representative of authority, and performance of official duties. These concepts are disclosed in the said resolution of the Plenum of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, including “representative of authority” in the Note to Article 318 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. At the same time, for the correct and complete understanding and application of Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, differentiating this corpus delicti from related crimes, such as libel (Article 128.1. of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation), as well as similar administrative offenses (articles 5.61, 5.61.1 of the Administrative Code of the Russian Federation), it is necessary to clarify and consolidate the main and qualified features of the considered corpus delicti precisely in the disposition of Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.

It is reasonable to disclose in more detail the concept of “insult”, as it was previously fixed in Article 130 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. Before the repeal of Article 130, this definition of insult was the main one in the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, being a guideline for determining the content and special compositions of insults in the code. Nowadays, the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, including Article 319, does not define the term “insult”, which indicates the incompleteness of the norms and the legislator’s unsystematic and inconsistent approach to their presentation. No doubt, Paragraph 17 of the Resolution of the Plenum of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation No. 14 of June 1, 2023 provides a fairly complete and detailed definition of what constitutes an insult to a representative of authorities, the main content of which is an indication that this is a public humiliation of the honor and dignity of a representative of power, affecting his/her personal and (or) professional (official) qualities, expressed in an indecent or another form that degrades the honor and dignity of the victim. However, in

the absence of a legal definition of the term “insult” in the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, the Plenum of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation actually creates a new criminal law norm, which is unacceptable, since the highest court is not a legislative authority. In this regard, the relevant definition, in our opinion, should be contained in the disposition of Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.

In addition, as we have already noted, the results of the study indicate the need to differentiate criminal liability for insulting a public authority depending on the nature and degree of public danger of this act by consolidating basic, qualified and especially qualified elements of crimes in Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. Currently, there is no such differentiation of criminal liability, which does not correspond to the general approach prevailing in the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation in the construction of crimes, is a manifestation of an unsystematic approach and a violation of legal technique. A lack of differentiation of criminal liability for insulting a public authority is inconsistent with the fact that in all related and similar types of crimes and administrative offenses, differentiation of liability is provided. So, in the previously valid article 130 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation provided for the basic and qualified composition of insults, depending on the sign of publicity. In Article 336 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, criminal liability for insulting a serviceman is differentiated depending on the subject of the crime and the status of the serviceman, criminal liability for the contempt of court is differentiated depending on the legal status of participants and subjects of legal proceedings. A significant differentiation of criminal liability is provided for in Article 128.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation for libel, depending on the presence of a sign of publicity, subject of the crime, his/her status and professional capabilities, nature and content of libel. Besides, significant differentiation of administrative liability for insults is fixed in Article 5.61 of the Administrative Code of the Russian Federation, depending on the sign of publicity, status of the subject of the crime, and repetition of the insult. As can be seen, most grounds for differentiating liabilities

in these articles are repeated, which confirms their importance. These grounds must be taken into account and reflected in Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation for the construction of compositions on the insult of public authorities, differing in nature and degree of public danger.

In recent years, many articles of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation have been supplemented with qualified compositions that take into account, as an aggravating circumstance, the significant spread and commission of crimes involving public demonstration, using information and telecommunications networks, mass media, and the Internet (articles 105, 111, 112, 115–117, 119, 280.4 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, etc.). In particular, the relevant aggravating circumstance was fixed in paragraph “t” of Part 1 of Article 63 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. However, these changes have not affected Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, which is equally affected by negative processes in society under consideration.

In this regard, in our opinion, in order to differentiate criminal liability for insulting a public authority, Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation should provide for basic and qualified compositions of this crime. At the same time, in order to ensure a unified approach to the construction of *corpus delicti*, we consider it necessary to focus on how compositions of crimes in Article 128.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and administrative offences in Article 5.61 of the Administrative Code of the Russian Federation are constructed in terms of protected public relations. The basic elements of insulting a public official under Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation should not be deliberately public in nature. The qualified composition, however, should include liability for committing this act in a public form, including via the Internet — this aspect should be emphasized particularly. This crime should be punishable, among other things, by imprisonment for a certain period of time. Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation should also include a special qualified form of insulting a public offi-

cial committed by an offender who abuses his/her official position.

Conclusion

Taking into account results of the study, in order to improve provisions of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation providing for liability for insulting a public authority, eliminate gaps and contradictions, consolidate the differentiation of responsibility for this act, and ensure a unified and systematic approach to the criminal law regulation of the relations in question, we consider it necessary to set out Article 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation in the following wording:

«1. Insulting a public authority, that is, humiliating his/her honor and dignity, affecting his/her personal and (or) professional (official) qualities, during the performance of his/her official duties or in connection with their performance, expressed in an indecent or other form contrary to generally accepted norms of morality is punishable by a fine of up to five hundred thousand rubles or in the amount of the convicted person’s salary or other income for a period of up to six months, or by compulsory labor for up to three hundred and sixty hours, or correctional labor for up to one year.

2. Insulting a public authority contained in a public speech, publicly displayed work or mass media, or committed publicly using information and telecommunication networks, including the Internet, or against several government officials, including those who are not individually identified, is punishable by a fine of up to one million rubles or in the amount of the convicted person’s salary or other income for a period of up to one year, or by compulsory labor for up to two hundred and forty hours, or by forced labor for up to two years, or by arrest for up to two months, or by imprisonment for up to two years.

3. Insulting a public authority committed due to the perpetrator’s official position is punishable by a fine of up to two million rubles or in the amount of the convicted person’s salary or other income for a period of up to two years, or by compulsory labor for up to three hundred and twenty hours, or by forced labor for up to three years, or by arrest for up to four months, or by imprisonment for up to three years.»

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Received April 9, 2025