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The Burden of Pseudo-Existing Choice¹

Abstract

The pseudo-alternative nature of the forthcoming presidential election in Russia is a logical outcome of the vertical of power and influence that has been formed for many years in this state. Starting from that presupposition, the author analyzes the public opinion dynamics among Russian citizens relative to the assumed criteria of choice as to a presidential contender on behalf of the party in power (i.e. “winner”), on the one hand, as well as the electoral intentions and expectations of the population, on the other hand. Based on this analysis, the author concludes that the interdependence between the functions of the ruling clique and the masses may change as a result of a transition from a “procedural” to an historical choice. A new structure of society characterized by a gradual weakening of the highest ranks can pave the way for modern patterns of two-sided dependencies in the future.

The notorious pseudo-alternative nature of the forthcoming presidential election is a logical consequence of the power, influence and “vertical” formation that have been present for many years. The burden of choice (or, to be exact, the selection of deputies at various levels, governors, senators and so forth) belongs nearly totally to the central power (or to those who represent it). Now the same occurs with the choice of the presidential “successor”. Of course, we do not speak here about choosing a candidate but rather a “winner”.

¹ Translated from the Russian text “Breyma mnimogo vybora”, *Sotsiologiya: teoriya, metody, marketing*, 2006, № 4, pp. 14–24.

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It need not be mentioned that the power expects that most voters will accept the inevitable successor and the fact of his “appointment”. (Frankly, the efforts made by power and power-supporting bodies to create the necessary social “atmosphere” for the success of the coming event reveal a feeling of tension and even growing uncertainty among the developers of this routine.) It has become evident that existing or even potential deviation (within a year or somewhat longer) among public preferences will not change the election result. At the same time, we consider a study of mass consciousness and its dynamics related to the coming period to be worthwhile. First, we can see an instructive routine applied to push all spheres and mechanisms of public opinion for the predetermined result, with a demonstration of all strengths and weaknesses. Second, doubts and reservations that will accompany the decision of Russian voters to accept the choice imposed “from above” will determine the *quality* of public support manifested towards the “successor” and his environment.

The Difficulty of Simplifying

Becoming more evident in society and especially in the upper echelons of state power, the tension surrounding the “problem of 2008” seems odd, given the very simple situation in which the electoral procedure is expected to deliver the result known in advance. However, an attentive viewer can notice that *the simplicity of the situation and its prospects are deceptive*. This relates even more to the social and political (to be exact, administrative and procedural) mechanisms of preparation for the coming election, as well as to its consequences, especially in the future. Some of those problems were revealed by recent studies of public opinion in Russia.

According to the public opinion poll of April 2006 ($N = 1600$), 33% of respondents suppose that the presidential election of 2008 will represent “a **real competition** between candidates, 51% think that it will be a **performance of competition** while the President will become the person presented by Putin”. The “real competition” is mostly mentioned by possible voters of the party in power —“Yedinaya Rossiya”, or “United Russia” (45% vs. 43% who expect a “performance of competition”). Adherents of the Communist Party expect a more cynical scenario (31% : 59%), and those who support Zhirinovskiy are the most realistic (28% : 62%). We do not think that power and its patrons are afraid of someone strong enough to compete with the current President or his favorite. What seems to be a problem is the fact that a group of confidantes (per-

mitted to choose, as Fazil Iskander characterized them) has to choose not only a “successor” but also the *mechanism of his legitimization* in narrow circles surrounding state power, as well as in front of “the phantom public”, not to mention the “outer image” (i.e. the most important and successful aspect supporting the “inner image” in the current situation of multi-mirror reflections).

There are some hardly-compatible options that have to be considered in order to solve, or attempt to solve, the following tasks.

First, it would be advisable to observe at least an illusion of legitimacy (or recognition?) related to transitional routines when the laws currently in force, international precedents, etc. are evidently violated.

Second, with regard to inevitable changes in the President’s innermost environment, a “vertical” support (administrative and political mechanism) for power must be preserved, as well as a balance between competitive groups of influence in the top echelons.

Third, it is necessary to ensure the personal (career, status, etc.) and group safety of those who make decisions.

Fourth, there is the painful issue of how the efforts applied to achieve an immediate effect will mesh with actions directed toward prospects; for example, at the stage when the accumulated resources (material and moral, such as trust, patience, and readiness to wait for improvements) will be exhausted.

Fifth, there is an urgent need to show some “new” changes in direction, style, or staff. However, the main tendencies in political life developed in past years should be preserved, as well as the balance between various groups of the upper echelons. (Recall here the changes in government, administration and even in the Office of the Public Prosecutor, in June and July 2006).

Similarly difficult issues could be listed as well.

The importance of these issues can be inferred from the great efforts made (especially in recent months) to find the appropriate construction and conditions with which to bring to life a mechanism capable of combining incompatible options. Possible ways out may include public discussions about the possibility of Putin’s third term (despite the fact that President Putin has rejected that option many times), postponing the election, making the election indirect instead of direct (through the State Duma or Federation Council), prolongation of the presidential term to 5-7 years, Putin’s nomination for President in the year 2012 (after the next four-year term), a lifelong presidential term in the oriental manner (as in Turkmenistan), and so on. According to the polling data, Russian public

opinion might be ready to accept (this readiness is gradually growing) only two options: “Putin-3” and an “appointed successor”. The polling data of July 2006 ($N = 1600$) revealed that both options got almost equal support, from 40% of respondents (this corresponds to 60% of voters).

At the same time, a certain *quasi*-ideological and emotional background for a possible transitional routine is hastily being formed. On this path, there are significant steps such as the reanimation of a “hostile environment” outside the country, a “special” Russian way being confirmed with official status (“sovereign democracy”) and retrospective re-interpretation of laws, civil institutions, freedoms, etc. Contrary to the one-party Soviet model, the present-day power system, with its totally pragmatic orientations, neither aspires to an ideology nor makes appeal to any ideals, sacred theory etc. It is sufficient to rely on *quasi*-ideological tools (*ad hoc* slogans, appeals, pledges used in case of emergency or mobilization). The same patterns are applied to additional organizational measures to support the vertical of power (such as development of youth movement networks, both *claqueur* and militant by nature).

“Partization” as a Bridge to the 2012 Election?

In June 2006, the public’s attention was attracted to the idea of President Putin’s membership in “Yedinaya Rossiya”. Of course, it would be not just a membership but *leadership*. (Under the existing government and political system, this would make the party a “leading and directing force” of society similar to what we have had in the past). Such a position as party leader could make it possible for Putin to become [*President*] in 2008 and to maintain (with the help of the same close environment, but presented as party figures) real power, as well as to have a guarantee for legally holding the highest post in 2012 for the next two terms. As we know, in the twentieth century, a strict party-and-government mechanism twice (at the beginning of the 1920s and 1950s) had a good chance to guarantee succession of power in hard situations of changing leaders and political difficulties. We doubt if today the vertical line of power and quasi-party bodies of “Yedinaya Rossiya” are able to perform the same functions and to make the society take them for granted. According to the poll of July 2006 ($N = 1600$), public opinion has not been ready for the “party project”: only 21% vs. 62% of respondents support the President’s party membership, and only 34% vs. 43% would accept Putin as a leader of “Yedinaya Rossiya”; this would insignificantly (by 2%) improve mass attitude to the party but noticeably (by 7%) worsen the attitude towards

Putin. Of course, those are not electoral prognoses but merely attitudes of the mass public: in an actual electoral situation, when the bells of a “loud fight” and the cannons of mass political destruction are activated, the distribution of opinions may be quite different.

By the way, according to information leaked from “the highest ranks”, at the end of July the idea of “partization” of Russia’s presidential post has not secured unanimous support.

At the moment, we have an exclusive and unbelievable situation: in a short period of time, along with totally personalized supreme power exists the absolutely impersonalized future leader, owner of the “main” state mask. The next search for a “black cat in a dark room” (where it has already existed as the current President said) attracts attention of the mass public and researchers not to the persons but to principles and mechanisms of the coming political transition. The key issue is not to change a person but to change (or not) the existing social and political *regime*. The future choice seems to be very simple and *very general*. We mean this in its *pragmatic* sense: there is no choice (possible, presumable, discussable, or hardly probable) among persons, ideas, programs, or parties; the choice is “merely” between maintaining or changing the existing regime in the country. (It will be another thing when the choice becomes real). Supporters of the present power consider its further existence to be much more important than its personal realization. By the way, the same goes for the “opposite side”, opponents of the regime even if they are not ready to understand or accept this fact. In all personalized power systems, any decisive choice significantly depends on tyranny, caprice, sympathy or antipathy, these things being subject to fortune-telling, intuition, and imagination. Of course, we study the social circumstances and frames in which those factors act. When the power starts to rush about or loses its temper (as a result of uncertainty, inferiority complex, delusion of persecution or megalomania), the most hidden secrets come out.

Now we are going to talk just about *personal* expectations. Last year society was presented with a number of conditional choices between Putin (the option meaning that the term of the current President will be prolonged), “another Putin” (an appointed successor), and “not Putin” (a “principally another” candidate, opponent to the present one). The society and public opinion have no right to know *who* will be appointed (by the state power, near-power intrigues, etc.) to the highest post, but they can imagine *what could be* (or *could not be*) a secret “successor”. You will see below that the opinions popular in society are very interesting.

By the way, the phenomenon (fact) of making a strict secret though the “successor” is already known (as Putin asserts) is an interesting aspect showing both the nature of the existing regime and some inherent problems and processes (mainly invisible or occurring “under the carpet”). We suppose that in this case secrecy is not only a result of the owner’s caprice but a necessary condition for the functioning of state power. (In the words of a well-known character depicted by Dostoevsky, we can say that, having no “secrets”, such a system loses its “prestige” and “wonder”). Moreover, in a critical “transitional” situation, even a half-measure of publicity given to the “successor” would turn him, whoever he is, into an object of severe inner competition and fears felt mostly by the present leader¹. Keeping the “successor” as a deep secret means not only that the “top” is absolutely sure of the readiness of citizens, being unaware, to accept anyone appointed; it is also evidence of fear that the electoral procedure might be transformed into a subject of public choice.

Where Does a Successor Come from? “Desirable” Choice and “Expected” One

The data of the recent poll allow a comparison of respondents’ ideas of the environment from which the President *should be chosen* in 2008 and their assumptions about the environment from which *Putin will choose* his successor.

Personal preferences and expectations about Putin’s actions are similar but not identical: almost one third of respondents take for granted the fact that Putin’s successor will be from his nearest environment; more than half think that his choice will be limited within this circle. As we see, public opinion considers only two sources important enough to supply the current President’s successor: Putin’s environment and some “independent politicians” (though imaginary). All other groups do not attract significant attention. But according to respondents, Putin will content himself with his environment and government officials (significantly rarer), as well as FSB officers (even rarer). There is no hope that

¹ The archetype for a power transition of this kind in systems of absolutized power was described in the famous study by James Fraser: for example, an ancient kingdom in Aricia where a legal successor to the supreme priest (i.e. king) with unlimited power could become the one who killed him (*J.G. Fraser. The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion. — M., 1980. — P. 10*). The all-powerful leader’s fear of conspiracy, and of attempts on his life made from within the nearest environment and by possible successors, were typical situations in the period of Stalin’s rule.

the President will look for his successor among leaders of parties or independent figures of authority. Taking into account the fact that the results of mass imagination (both columns describe this phenomenon) reflect the distribution of public expectations, we must acknowledge that there is a unique (“sovereign”?) social and political situation having hardly any analogue in national or world history.

Table 1

**From which Environment are we to Choose
the Next President of Russia?***

<i>Options</i>	<i>How it should be done</i>	<i>How Putin will most likely do it</i>
Vladimir Putin's nearest environment	31	55
Ministers, government officials	6	9
The Chairman and Deputies of the State Duma / Federation Council	4	2
Leaders of political parties and public movements	9	2
Regional leaders	7	2
Directors / Top-managers of enterprises, companies, banks	2	0
Military leaders	2	1
Head(s) of the Public Prosecutor's Office, Supreme / Supreme Arbitration / Constitutional Court, Ministry of Home Affairs	1	1
Head of the Federal Security Service (FSB) / Chiefs of the FSB departments	2	5
Diplomats, foreign relations specialists	1	2
Scientists, qualified specialists	1	1
Respectful figures in the sphere of culture, literature, and mass media	2	1
Independent politicians, influential public figures	11	2
Other	1	0
Difficult to answer	19	19

* Percent of the number of respondents, May 2006, *N* = 1600

It is known that the party-soviet tradition was to form a reserve for the highest level staff mostly from regional party leaders, “owners” of oblasts, republics (the path “region-to-center” brought to the top Kirov, Zhdanov, Zhdanov’s group, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Andropov). Only during the irreversible decline of the Soviet system was the main post filled by a pure functionary (Chernenko). In stable western democracies, regional leaders (state governors, city mayors) or parliamentary and party leaders are usually appointed to the leading roles. (We do not here refer to unstable regimes in Latin America or Asia). But in present-day Russia, one cannot even imagine any of those ways to reach the highest position. It must be emphasized that the above-mentioned is accepted by public opinion as a whole, as well as by all its political factions (or each party’s voters). For the past years, regions, parliamentary institutions and political parties permitted to “touch” power have had to lose all their independence and be turned into faceless or even headless appendages of the central administrative body. Parliamentary speakers and TV personalities became characters in our memoirs about the first stage of “perestroika”. The real (as opposed to decorative) staff resources for the ruling groups enclose only their own members. At the moment, they practice horizontal swapping inside administration, government, court and prosecution circles. The most demonstrative swapping happened in June and July 2006 inside the Prosecutor’s Office (V. Ustinov and Y. Chayka). They do not want to accept anyone new into that close group, if for no other reason than that it might attract public attention to the shadow activities of the power institutions or leaders at various levels.

Criteria for Choosing a Successor: “Desirable” and “Expected”

Let us look at the next page of the same polling data.

In this case, differences between mass desire and predictions of Putin’s actions are *significant* by *absolutely all* positions (and that makes them interesting). The most demonstrative aspect is that public opinion considers *morals* to be the main criterion for choosing a successor, while half as many respondents expect that Putin will use this option. The same difference (half as much) exists between people’s desires and expectations on such options as a successor’s ability to be a leader and people’s respect for him. At the same time, “the current President’s trust

in a successor” was mentioned *twice as often* in expectations as in desires, while “closeness to Putin” was emphasized in expectations *six times more often* than in desires.

Table 2

**What is Necessary to Take into Account
when Choosing the Next President of Russia?***

Options	How it is necessary to choose	How Putin most likely will do
Qualification, work experience	39	27
Moral characteristics (honesty, decency, unselfishness, incorruptibility)	51	24
Ability to work with people	28	17
Ability to be a leader, to make people follow you	31	15
Independence, self-dependence	15	6
The current President’s trust in this person	12	25
Respect won by most people of Russia	38	17
Closeness to Putin	5	29
Other	1	0
Difficult to answer	5	14

* Percent of total respondents, May 2006, N = 1600

We would like to discuss the above-mentioned data in detail, taking into account different social and political groups.

Significant differences between the “necessary” and “expected from Putin” criteria are registered in all age groups; magnitudes of those differences are almost the same in various groups. Pragmatic criteria (qualification, work with people, leadership) are more important for young people, while mature and senior population groups prefer values criteria (moral characteristics, independence, people’s respect). Both the young and old pay little attention to the “favoritism” options, such as the President’s trust and closeness to him.

Table 3A**Criteria for Choosing Putin's Successor (Age Groups)***

<i>Age</i>	Qualifica- tion	Moral	Work with people	Being a leader	Independ- ence	President's trust	People's respect	Closeness to Putin
WHAT IS NECESSARY TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT								
18–24 years	42	47	32	35	13	12	33	4
25–39 years	42	52	28	30	14	11	39	5
40–54 years	39	49	29	32	15	13	35	4
55 years and over	37	54	25	27	16	12	43	5
WHAT PUTIN WILL TAKE INTO ACCOUNT								
18–24 years	34	22	17	19	5	25	19	26
25–39 years	27	26	14	16	5	28	18	30
40–54 years	27	24	16	16	5	26	14	29
55 years and over	23	24	15	17	7	23	18	29

* Percent of total respondents

Table 3B**Criteria for Choosing Putin's Successor (Education Groups)***

<i>Education</i>	Qualifica- tion	Moral	Work with people	Being a leader	Independ- ence	President's trust	People's respect	Closeness to Putin
WHAT IS NECESSARY TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT								
Higher	43	56	29	37	17	12	41	3
Secondary	38	49	29	29	15	13	35	5
Incomplete secondary	40	50	28	28	13	10	42	6
WHAT PUTIN WILL TAKE INTO ACCOUNT								
Higher	33	30	16	18	4	27	17	27
Secondary	27	23	16	18	6	25	18	29
Incomplete secondary	22	23	14	14	7	26	14	30

* Percent of total respondents

Highly-educated people value the most qualification, moral characteristics and abilities of being a leader; noticeably more rarely (1.5–2 times), but more frequently than persons with lower educational attainment, they hope that the current president will take into account those options. No one favors the “favoritism” criteria, though there are significant portions in all groups (one third to one fourth) of respondents who think that Putin will consider precisely that criterion.

Table 3C**Criteria for Choosing a Putin’s Successor (Party Electorate)***

<i>Party electorate</i>	Qualification	Moral	Work with people	Being a leader	Independence	President’s trust	People’s respect	Closeness to Putin
WHAT IS NECESSARY TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT								
The Communist Party of the Russian Federation, or KPRF	39	52	24	35	12	8	42	3
“Yedinaya Rossiya”	41	53	33	30	14	15	38	5
The Union of Right Forces, or SPS (“Soyuz Pravykh Sil”)	33	28	40	31	23	–	47	5
“Yabloko” (Apple), the Russian United Democratic Party	60	48	42	41	25	7	56	–
The Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, or LDPR	35	48	35	35	9	3	41	4
“Rodina” (Motherland – National Patriotic Union)	41	42	22	31	15	8	40	–
WHAT PUTIN WILL TAKE INTO ACCOUNT								
KPRF	16	15	13	11	5	25	17	36
“Yedinaya Rossiya”	32	28	21	20	7	29	17	24
SPS	27	15	8	8	–	44	34	21
“Yabloko”	38	17	15	7	1	44	34	21
LDPR	19	11	7	10	4	30	10	32
“Rodina”	32	43	35	28	8	20	32	18

* Parties for which the respondents are ready to vote at the next parliamentary elections

It is interesting that representatives of the democratic opposition focus their attention on the pragmatic criteria (they even hope that these criteria will be taken into account). Moral characteristics are rather more important for supporters of communists and “Yedinaya Rossiya”, but neither the former nor the latter (please note the position of voters for the pro-Putin “Yedinaya Rossiya”) expect the President to take into consideration these qualities. Moreover, even those electoral groups are not prone to accept readily the “favoritism” principles.

It seems that the Russian public’s readiness to accept Putin’s choice (since there is no other option) does not mean that people are ready to accept the *criteria* of that choice.

Time of Choice: “Procedural” and “Historical”

The election planned for March 2008 seems not to bring any big surprises for its organizers, mass participants, and observers. Neither personal nor emotional factors will change its sense: the election is just a step in preparation for inevitable and painful changes in social and historical perspective. In such cases, the “nearest” choice (a successor chosen from the closest environment, of the same style and direction) used to be meaningful, until the point at which all previously accumulated resources of trust, hope and patience had been exhausted. (The situation can be clearly explained when one considers that Russia’s economy is oriented mainly toward natural resources). At the moment, the post-electoral situation looks like a direct continuation of the existing (pre-electoral) one: the choice initiative and all its risks belong exclusively to the “top” (despite tension and collisions occurring at that level), while the “lower” strata of society, as we have seen, have to accept the result prepared in advance. (In other words, mass participation in the electoral procedure is made as simple as the role of the legendary foremother in her marriage choice; though she neither needed to think about the consequences nor could refer to the “worst” possible option). But in the social “chain”, the most loaded link is inevitably the weakest, which as a rule causes the weakness of the whole construction. Besides, it should be taken into account that “near” changes do not solve the accumulated problems, but merely put them on other shoulders. The “far-reaching” choice (of the social and political regime), meaning changes in the problems themselves and in the ways of their solution, is much more impor-

tant but inevitably delayed; a signal to begin this process (but not a procedure for beginning it) will be the exhaustion of resources.

Of course, a transition from the “near” to the “far” choice will change, to a certain extent, the balance between the “top” and “mass” functions. It is impossible to go back to the “mass” revolutions of the nineteenth century; but a restructuring of society so that the upper echelons of state power gradually weaken might clear the way for more modern patterns of bilateral dependencies.