"SATISFACTION" OF POLITICAL PREFERENCES

COMMUNICATIVE PATTERNS IN THE FORMATION OF THE RUSSIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Research problem

- The growing authoritarian trends in Russian politics, and, most importantly, a seeming support of these trends by the majority of Russian population (Volkov and Goncharov 2014), make revisiting the question of democracy in Russia particularly important.
- At the same time, polls indicate that Russians have been consistently displaying positive attitudes towards democracy and democratic values in general (Rose and Mishler 2010; Volkov and Goncharov 2014)

RQ

- This puzzling trend begs a question: how can the positive attitudes toward democratic values coexist with the indifference of most Russians toward the shrinking of democratic freedoms?

Literature review

- Path dependence perspective focus on values deeply rooted in the Russian culture and developed as a result of "fundamental and long-term social and political processes" (Fleron 1996; Reisinger et al. 1994; Sil and Chen 2004; White 1979): aternalism, hierarchy and nostalgia for authoritarian rule

- New-institutionalism: the lack of experience of living in a state with *functional* democratic institutions induces the Russians to support the authoritarian leader. (Carnaghan 2008).

Literature review and assumption

- We argue that the problem is rooted not in the lack of knowledge about the political alternatives by the Russians but rather in what seems to be a lack of environment that would allow for these alternatives to be internalized in the process of communication.
- 'the lack of mediating structures coincides with the lack of 'tools' with which to understand the transformation' (Oushakine 2000, 1006),
- 'arrested discursive creativity' (Oushakine 2000, 1002)

Theoretical Framework
Discursive Institutionalism and the Role of Deliberation in the Political Process

- Institutions are not the 'formalized institutions', which, as is often claimed, structure action. Instead, they are 'internal to the actors, serving both as structures that constrain actors and as constructs created and changed by those actors' (Schmidt 2008, 314)
- In other words, if we want to examine the attitudes of Russians toward the democratic institutions, we must examine their attitudes towards the core principles of these democratic institutions as these principles manifest themselves at the level of ordinary consciousness
- People follow the 'logic of practice, which is a product of a lasting exposure to conditions similar to those in which they are placed' (Bourdieu 1990, 11).

Theoretical framework
Discursive institutionalism and the role of deliberation in the political process

- Main goal of the democratic institutions is to create public spaces for collective deliberation and discussion (Sunstein 1991).
- The key function of democratic institutions is not the realization of political preferences – or, as Bohman (1996) puts it, "satisfaction of preferences" – but the creation and maintenance of institutional opportunities for the discussion of these preferences, which in turn helps articulate these preferences (Sunstein 1991, 12).

Theoretical Framework
Social Heterogeneity and Procedural Diversity in the Political Process

- Interpersonal communication across differences or any exposure to differing views is a valuable component of public opinion formation (Gutman and Thompson 1998; Mutz and Martin 2001).
- Azmanova (2010): "procedural diversity of social interactions" in the process of the development of "better citizens"/civic competency.
- Azmanova (2010): The growth of reflexivity and critical thinking is expected in the conditions of "plurality of differently situated social groups… held together by social practices".
- It is the public sphere that makes these social practices visible and therefore relevant for the 'normative disagreements and public debates' (Azmanova 2011, 22).

Utilitarian attitude toward politics

- Exclusion of Others from a social environment and of the depreciation of communication with Others leads to:

- When the Other is excluded from one's social circle, one's actions aim at achieving effectiveness – the key goal in economics - rather than justice, which is the key goal of politics and political action (Elster 1996)
- The formation of preferences only takes place by comparing options taken as "externally" determined (Cohen 1996; Manin 1987)
- Citizens behaving as consumers perceive the consequences of their choices as affecting their particular situation most "deeply and clearly" and expect the coming of these consequences "immediately and directly". (Manin 1987)

Utilitarian attitude toward politics

- The difference between *market choice* and *political choice*:

- market choice unlike a political choice assumes precise knowledge regarding human needs
- the outcomes of economically determined choices become clear within a short time
- the outcomes of politically determined decisions often "make themselves felt only in the long run" and are "diffuse and scattered"

THESIS

- It seems that today's atomization of the Russian society – the conservation of strong ties through domestication of communication in the narrow circle of relatives and friends along with the growing distrust of other (Gudkov, Dubin, and Zorkaja 2008) – sharply decreases the opportunities for communication in the public sphere across various communicative spaces.

WE ARGUE

- that the lack of epistemological pluralism and interpersonal communication across differences constitutes a dominant social order in Russia and therefore contributes to sustainability of the private frame of reference.
- we suggest that attitudes toward politics in general and democratic institutions specifically will be determined by most Russians through the lens of private, particular frame of reference.

Method

- We asked students of Moscow universities to write essays addressing specific questions related to their views of politics and the political process (listed below). (fifty students)

1. Which key themes emerge in our participants' discussions of politics and the political process?
2. To what extent do the participants draw on particularistic, private frames of reference in their definitions and discussions of politics?
3. To what extent do the participants draw on collective frames of reference that emphasize communication and deliberation?

FINDINGS

POLITICS AS PRIMARILY A TOOL FOR IMPROVING PERSONAL MATERIAL WELL-BEING

- As one of the respondents noted, "politics can solve people's problems; for example, guarantee free education... or help solve legal problems".
- Others mentioned "unemployment, lack of adequate housing, underdeveloped infrastructure," "national defence," "healthcare, food safety and press freedom" among the problems politics must solve.

FINDINGS

POLITICS AS PRIMARILY A TOOL FOR IMPROVING PERSONAL MATERIAL WELL-BEING

- ”Politics directly influences people's lives. For example, when Moscow's mayor changed, my neighbourhood became better; playgrounds, parking spaces and street lights were installed. Public parks where people can spend time with family and friends appeared in Moscow”.
- “When Luzhkov (former mayor of Moscow – authors) was a mayor, there were pretty much no adequate public spaces for spending time outside or just walking around Moscow. These are mundane details but they make up the influence that politics has on people's lives”.

Findings

Action Helps, Discussion Hurts

- "there is nothing to discuss if there is no action"
- "discussion alone can't change anything"
- "Politics for me is about action; to some extent it is discussion too but it is not the discussion that shapes the statehood but real actions… Discussion doesn't have much value"
- "A couple of years ago politics was all about real action for me. I wouldn't say that politics had completely degraded to the level of discussion, but there is certainly a tendency toward that. It's become trendy to participate in politics"

FINDINGS

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF POLITICS IS EXTERNALIZED

- THEY PERCEIVE IT ONLY AS A TOOL FOR "IMPROVING" (MATERIAL WELL-BEING), "REALIZING" OR "SATISFYING" (PERSONAL GOALS), OR "SOLVING" PROBLEMS.
- THE MAJORITY OF STUDENTS DO NOT PERCEIVE POLITICS FROM A COMMUNICATIVE, RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE – AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO FIGURE OUT AND UNDERSTAND THEIR OWN POLITICAL PREFERENCES.
- POLITICS IS UNDERSTOOD SOLELY AS A (PHYSICAL) ACT OF ELECTING A LEADER WHO COULD ADDRESS SPECIFIC PROBLEMS. THE PROBLEMS ARE ALWAYS CONCRETE AND ONE-DIMENSIONAL – ROADS, PLAYGROUNDS, ACCESS TO EDUCATION, ETC.
- STUDENTS CLEARLY PRIORITIZE ACTION AS THE MOST MEANINGFUL ELEMENT OF POLITICS, BELITTLING AND TRIVIALIZING DISCUSSION AS "MEANINGLESS CHATTER" AND "FANCY TALK," AS WELL AS ASSOCIATING DISCUSSION WITH "INFORMATION WARS."

FINDINGS

- Since attitudes toward politics and the political are determined in such terms as "practical benefits" and "end results," the demand for the development of institutions of the public sphere is almost nonexistent.

- The underdevelopment of the public sphere that does not allow for the political discourse of Russians to transcend the boundaries of the private frame of reference.

DISCUSSION

- "POOR QUALITY" OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS (CARNAGHAN 2008; HUTCHESON AND PETERSSON 2016)
- EXISTENCE OF THE "COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT" (GANDHI AND PRZEWORSKI 2006; TEAGUE 2011; GREENE 2012)
- THE CITIZENS' UNWILLINGNESS TO CHANGE THE STATUS QUO OUT OF THE FEAR THE LOSSES WOULD BE GREATER THAN THE GAINS (GREENE 2012; BUSYGINA AND FILIPPOV 2015)

Discussion

- We argue that the indifference of Russians to political competition is determined not by the "poor quality" of political institutions as institutionalists claim (Carnaghan 2008; Hutcheson and Petersson 2016) but rather by the indifference of Russians to institutionalization as a form of social organization in general.
- Our study suggests that changing or preserving the institutional structure of the society is not taken into consideration in citizens' assessments of the (in)effectiveness of the state. Citizens might express their discontent with the actions of the state but their assessment of the state's performance lacks institutional dimension.

DISCUSSION

- UNDERSTANDING OF POLITICAL OUTCOMES OF THE DECISIONS MADE BY THE STATE DOES NOT OVERLAP WITH THE POSSIBILITY TO INFLUENCE THE STATE AND DEMAND THE STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONS OF THE POLITICAL COMPETITION

- AS A RESULT, CITIZENS DO NOT SEE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE QUALITY OF LIFE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS BECAUSE THEY DO NOT VALUE THE PUBLIC SPHERE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF POWER AND INFLUENCE