

ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Russian National Identity As Argument Construction An Assessment Of Political Transformations In Post-Soviet Russia



Daniel Yergin and Thane Gustafson suggested in their 1994 report for Cambridge Energy Research Associates that this year, 2010, is a significant moment for assessing political transformations in post-Soviet Russia. They chose the year 2010 because, in their words, it “will have been exactly twenty-five years since Gorbachev came to power, starting the process that led to the new Russian revolution. By then, multiple transitions will be very far along and many of the uncertainties will be resolved. And, of critical importance, by then a wholly new, post-Communist generation will be active in Russian life” (Yergin and Gustafson 1995, p. 108). In this paper[i], we accept Yergin and Gustafson’s invitation to use 2010 as a vantage point for reflection upon the post-Soviet political transformations in Russia and the subsequent Russian search for a new political and social identity. Consistent with their approach, we take a macro-view in our assessment of both political and identity transformations, focusing not on individual texts but rather broad trends substantiated through analysis of selected discourse examples drawn from leaders, the media, and other analysts.

1. Political Transformations in Post-Soviet Russia

In 1994, Young, Launer, and Fetissenko argued that the Chernobyl nuclear accident opened argumentative space that ultimately led to the downfall of the USSR. In 1993, Williams, Young, and Elliott argued that Russia needed to develop a “culture of communication” in order to effect democratic reform. That culture of communication never developed, and lies stillborn inside the Kremlin walls. The argumentative space that appeared so promising in the early 90s has nearly closed as dissent is suppressed and media outlets are closed or taken over by government agencies. One might ask, “What happened?”

Given Russia's history during the last two decades it should come as no surprise "that Russia is still struggling to conceptualize its identity" (Mijnssen 2010, p. 7). In this examination of the argument construction of the evolving Russian national identity, we will first explicate two orders of identification active in its reconstitution, one generated through definitional and associative arguments concerning the term "democracy" and the other generated through what Kenneth Burke calls a shared motivational structure, which he identifies as the scene/act ratio. Each order of identification creates a potential corresponding domain of "consubstantiality" wherein individual identities become shared identities, albeit always only partially shared and inevitably subject to divisions; it is where "I" becomes "we," "me" becomes "us," and collective action of a group or of a people becomes enabled (See Williams 1996).

Thus, through identification with "democracy," Russians might come to self-identify as "democrats," to collectively unify as "democrats," to become "a democratic people." In a similar, if less evident, manner, Russians might incorporate a scene/act motivational structure, a worldview that sees individual actions as fairly inevitable reflections of scenic forces, such as the voice of authority. This internalized motivational structure, itself a function of the process of identification with argument constructions that contain the structure, creates a worldview that can be recognized sympathetically in others, in turn creating a sympathetic alignment of our worldviews even as other orders of identification may differ. Thus, a "democrat" might view the free market as determining both economic and social progress, and a relatively orthodox "communist" might adhere to the Marxist principle that the worker/owner dialectic drives history toward class conflict, but they might find identification in the motivational structure - the way of viewing the world - wherein forces from "on high," be they economic or authoritarian, control their fates. There is a basis for consubstantiality in this order of identification as well, a collective identity in Russian passivity.

The construction of national identity that emerges from our analysis of contemporary Russian public arguments suggests an amalgamated identity that incorporates both the new features and historical features, especially those historical elements of identity amenable with national pride in being Russian and with the motivational structure of Russian passivity. More specifically, we argue that a key ingredient in this motivational structure is the equating of the leader

(or more broadly “authority”) with the controlling scenic element (rather than, say, the state itself), resulting in a habitual deference to “authority” in belief and behavior. This motivational structure itself is an important component of the amalgamated new Russian identity. An important cultural, rather than explicitly political, influence on the continuity and durability of this motivational structure in Russian identity is the long-engrained “high context” intricacy of Russian culture itself.

We conclude by suggesting that this is being institutionalized in political and governmental practice in contemporary Russia.

2. Symbols

In 1991, the year in which the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was disbanded by the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, Boris Yeltsin instituted a set of new national symbols for the Russian Federation in an attempt to expunge the Soviet past and to usher in the new political reality. Yeltsin replaced the Soviet flag, which featured the hammer and sickle, with the old Tsarist tricolor; the Tsarist double-headed eagle was resurrected as the state symbol; and the Soviet national anthem with music by Alexandrov was exchanged for Glinka’s “Patriotic Song,” a melody without lyrics that was composed during the first half of the 19th century. Faced with opposition from a recalcitrant, Communist Party dominated parliament, Yeltsin decided to adopt these symbols by presidential decree. What is significant in the context of our argument here is the fact that Yeltsin did not create anything new – he just resurrected symbols from the pre-Soviet (Tsarist) era.

A decade later, in the year 2000 – Vladimir Putin’s first year in office as President – this set of symbols was changed again. While retaining the Tsarist flag and the two-headed eagle, Putin resurrected the Red Army flag and the Soviet anthem (albeit with new words). Faced with opposition from a recalcitrant parliament dominated by a reformist coalition of political parties, Putin also adopted his symbols by presidential decree.

Both presidents understood the significance of these national symbols as an important component of national identity, and each leader chose the symbols that best represented his own particular vision of that identity. From an analytic perspective, these contemporary symbols of the nation function not only as representations of the current moment but also as gestures to the past, inviting

memory of and identification with the historical periods invoked, inviting that history into the present. The symbols work as significant enthymematic arguments in the construction of national identity.

By combining Tsarist and Soviet emblems, Putin might appear to have effected a compromise between the reformers and those who would restore more than the trappings of the Soviet state. After all, he chose, in effect, two from each period. Although many critics find the new set of state symbols to be a completely self-contradictory hodge-podge, we see two consistent themes that work to unify the symbols and to create reconstitutive ideals for the audience: each promotes nationalism by invoking the memory of strongly nationalistic periods within Russian history, and each also invokes an authoritarian historical era, implying that the Russian people need a strong central government, in stark contrast to their brief - and recent - experiment with "democracy."

3. *Democracy*

As the crumbling Soviet Union lurched into the 1980s, efforts to liberalize and open the political and economic system gained momentum. After Gorbachev ascended to power twenty-five years ago, his programs of reform - *perestroika* and *glasnost* - sustained and nurtured a nascent civil society and fostered a spirit of "democratic" reform. In Hedrick Smith's terms, Gorbachev "summoned a democratic spirit that aroused the slumbering giant of Russia" and "provoked the Soviet people to begin taking their destinies in their own hands" (p. xvi). During the mid-to-late 1980s, Russians became "no longer politically passive" (p. 556). Smith (1990) cites evidence of "election campaigns, mass demonstrations, environmental protests, miners' strikes" (p. 556) and suggests that Gorbachev's reforms aimed at "a humane Leninism that to Western ears sounds like democratic socialism" (p. 557).

Gorbachev's "democratizing" of the Soviet Union produced the hard-liners' coup of August 1991, which in turn triggered the great pro-democracy demonstrations in Russia, and particularly in Moscow. Whereas the strongest and most transformational identification with "democracy" and "democrat" probably came from within the grassroots civil society forming in the years of *glasnost*, the vast "democratic movement" spearheaded by Boris Yeltsin in 1991 made millions of Russians into overnight "democrats." In context, however, the pro-democracy movement was primarily oppositional in nature: to oppose re-imposition of a Soviet hard-line, one must be a democrat. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union

in December, the Russian Federation was born, and it was christened in the name of democracy. But how “democratic” was the new Russian democracy? And how democratic were the new Russian democrats?

From a Burkean perspective, to “perfect” identification with “democracy” has a concomitant effect of “perfecting” self-identification as a “democrat.” Similarly, we have argued elsewhere, during the transition period for example, Yeltsin called on the Russian people to reconstitute themselves as citizens of a democracy rather than as subjects of an autocratic system (See Ishiyama et al. 1997). As people begin to think of themselves as democrats living in a democracy, democrats gain cultural or national ascendancy, and a “democratic people” are born. In nations such as Great Britain and the United States, democratic identifications are historically entrenched, and, in Burke’s terms, there is consubstantiality as democrats. In this situation, democracy is motivated as agent/act:

[D]emocracy is felt to reside in us, intrinsically, because we are ‘a democratic people.’ Democratic acts, in this mode of thought, are derived from democratic agents, agents who would remain democratic in character even though conditions required the temporary curtailment or abrogation of basic democratic rights.... By the act-agent [agent/act] ratio, a ‘democratic people’ would continue to perform ‘democratic acts’; and to do so they would even, if necessary, go to the extent of restoring former conditions most favorable to democracy. (Burke 1945, p. 17)

In this sense, identification as democrats brings with it the *trust* in others to also act as democrats that is requisite to a functional democratic system. Smith (1990) argues that democracy “requires responsibility, the rule of law, a sense of compromise, a sense of self-restraint coming from within the individual, whether ruler or ruled. But history has not taught Russians the habits of compromise or restraint; theirs has been a winner-take-all politics. And so they have a gut anxiety that others will use freedom against them; they find it hard to trust each other to use it responsibly” (p. 428).

After a euphoric embrace of democratic identity (and an acceptance of the promise of equally instant economic prosperity), identification with and as “democrats” began to wane, and political divisions and fragmentations of national identity waxed. In an unfortunate irony, it was during this brief period of democratic euphoria that Yeltsin began the process of democracy by decree. As

Weigle (2000) observes, the “momentum of the transition... shifted from ‘below’ to ‘above,’” a shift that “marginalized the nascent Russian Civil society” (p. 2). Democracy was no longer a movement of the people but rather a declaration from the leaders. Daniels (1998) argues that “Yeltsin’s method of introducing reform is characteristically Russian – by decree of the autocrat” (p. 192). Reacting to Yeltsin’s sending of the tanks against the White House in October, 1993, Daniels is even more blunt: “[W]e can see that the old Russian habits of authoritarianism, centrism, imperialism, and conformism in belief were never pushed very far below the surface” (p. 191).

Carlson (2007) argues that much of this can be attributed to the high context nature of Russian culture. She notes:

High context cultures are obsessed by their past and often make an idol of their history. In our relationship with them, we cannot ignore *their* history, since they themselves do not view any single event in their personal, communal, professional, or national lives as an isolated event; everything is contextualized by shared history, shared experience, shared kinship, shared friendship, shared enmities, and/or shared prejudices. [p. 5, emphasis in original]

In Carlson’s view, it is Russian history that is the greatest determinant of Russia’s future. “If we look at Russian history, the first thing we must be struck by is its historical lack of democratic tradition. From the beginning Russian political patterns have been consistently authoritarian. We would have to go back to the 12th century to seek even the embryo of a democratic ‘populist’ tradition in the Novgorod *veche*, but that was a regionally limited, feudal institution and it disappeared” (p. 7).

Yeltsin himself ruled, in Daniels’ terms, “as a sort of elected tsar” (p. 193): that is, in the name of democracy, he ruled autocratically. And he never affiliated with a political party, leaving the fledgling party structures at a far remove from the levers of power. In addition, those new “democrats” minted and unified in opposition to the Soviet hardliners now turned on each other: as Anatoly Chubais of the radical reform party Russia’s Choice noted subsequently, the new Russian democrats tended to focus their efforts against “parties and blocs which are close to them” in philosophy (in *FBIS* 12 December 1993, p. 29). Similarly, Yegor Gaidar, also of Russia’s Choice, chastised the “democratic camp” for “its inability to achieve unity of actions” (in *FBIS*, 14 December 1993, p. 27). In other words, despite surface commonality under the banner of “democrats,” there was not

consubstantial identity among democrats. Consubstantiality may be understood as a “sharing of the same essence or substance, by which humans attain states of identification sufficient to act together cooperatively” (Williams 1996, p. 140). Thus, as Russia prepared for its first free and democratic elections for the state Duma in December of 1993, “the political spectrum was hopelessly fractionalized among parties that existed, as the Russian say, mostly in the imaginations of their leader” (Daniels 1998, p. 193). The banner of “democracy” was waved by parties as disparate as the free market shock therapists of Russia’s Choice, the ultra-nationalist “Liberal Democratic Party” (LDP) of Zhironovsky, the more Western, or enlightenment-based, democrats of Yabloko, or even the newly reinvented Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), whose leader, Gennady Zyuganov was dubbed “the ‘Democrat’ Zyuganov” by Feliks Babitskiy (*Rossiyskiye vesti* 3 Dec. 1993, p. 2; as quoted in *FBIS* 6 December 1993, p. 39; see also Williams et al. 1998).

Moreover, political democracy and free market capitalism soon became conflated in Russia, so much so that democracy itself was often conceived of as “market democracy.” This conflation meant that as the promise of rapid economic prosperity faded, the glow of democracy became tarnished. By the time of Yeltsin’s bid for reelection in 1996, “democrat” was no longer a term of ultimate identification, in part because too close an association was “drawn between the market economy and democratization. The reformers bore the wrath of the dispossessed, and the term ‘democracy’ is seldom heard anymore in Russia. Indeed, during his 1996 presidential campaign, Yeltsin seldom, if ever, used the terms ‘democracy’ or ‘democratization’; rather, he referred to ‘freedom’” (Ishiyama et al. 1997, p. 98, citing Likhachova). The 1993 CERA report *Russia 2010* notes that the “word *democrat* has become synonymous in the public mind with ‘irresponsible talker’ and ‘thief’ (*democrat*)” (Yergin and Gustafson 1995, p. 102). These associations in turn underscore an association between democracy and chaos or disorder – or that old Russian nemesis, anarchy.

The fragile identification with “democrat” never gained deep cultural traction. As an ultimate order of identification, it was shallow, generally without strong identity transformation, without embedded historical precursors, and of short historical duration. The deep identification-within required for genuine individual identity transformations and the consubstantial identification-between required for national acting-together never took firm root, with the result that neither the

agent/act ratio of motivational structure that Burke equates with a democratic people nor the level of trust in the democratic allegiance, or purity, of others that is necessary for a democracy to function came to fruition. The legacy of Russian democracy now lies in the oxymoronic “managed democracy” of Vladimir Putin.

4. Democrats and Autocrats

From the standpoint of the individual actor, a long-engrained motivational structure among Russians is what Burke calls the scene/act orientation. Burke, in writing of “the motivations of ‘democracy,’” highlighted the difference in political orientation: “But if one employed, instead, the scene-act ratio, one might hold that there are certain ‘democratic situations’ and certain ‘situations favorable to dictatorship or requiring dictatorship’” (Burke 1945, p. 17). “By the scene-act ratio, if the ‘situation’ itself is no longer a ‘democratic’ one, even an ‘essentially democratic’ people will abandon democratic ways” (Burke 1945, pp. 17-18).

Although it seems doubtful that Russians were ever consubstantial as “democrats,” Burke suggests simultaneous identification of “democrats” with the motivational structure scene-act would evacuate any motivational force from “democratic” identity. The prominence of the scene-act motivational structure in Russian identity formation and in the collective “we” of the Russian people is historically undeniable. From the tsars through the Soviet years, Russia was ruled autocratically, and individuals simply adapted to the political scene. Hedrick Smith (1990) reports the following description from one of his “Russian friends” in the 1970s:

Politics is like the weather – it comes from on high. There’s nothing that we can do about the weather except adjust – bundle up on cold days, wear raincoats when it rains, and wear light clothing when it’s warm. The same with politics. *They* make the politics..., and we adapt (p. 427, emphasis in original).

Individual acts are shaped by scenic elements, including of course the decrees of autocratic leaders; there has not been a historically conditioned sense that the citizen can act in accordance with his/her individual identity (agent/act) or that the citizen can, through individual action, change the political climate (agent/scene or even act/scene). Smith (1990) puts it this way:

[R]esistance to democracy, even mistrust of democracy... has been embedded in the Russian psyche by a long history of absolutism under both czars and

commissars. Russians have known precious little of such essential ingredients of democracy as moderation, constitutionalism, division of powers, rule of law, or restraint either by rulers or by revolutionaries. Political tolerance is not a typical Russian trait. Their politics has been given to extremes: iron rule or bloody revolt. This experience has left them with an abiding fear of chaos, disorder, of things careening wildly out of control, and therefore a strongly felt need for Authority to maintain order and to protect the people from violence and upheaval. (pp. 427-428)

Again Carlson (2007) attributes this to Russia's past, when she observes that Western culture could not have emerged without individualism. "Russia, on the other hand, always viewed the growth of Western individualism as psychic fragmentation, a dangerous loss of the 'wholeness of being.' Such extreme individualism was, from the Russian point of view, dangerous.... The rights of the individual can be granted only at the risk of jeopardizing the rights of the collective. In high-context Russia, where collective identity meant survival, individualism as a social/political stance was not encouraged" (p. 8).

This deference to Authority created passivity among the people. To extend the analogy from Smith's friend: if you don't like the weather, the only recourse is to wait for it to change because you cannot change the weather. This scene/act motivational structure is seemingly shared among most Russians. There is, in other words, a consubstantiality with respect to this shared world-view. *Russia 2010* makes the point:

On the whole, apart from a brief surge of interest in the late 1980s, much of the Russian population shows little interest in public issues and expresses great contempt for politicians and politics, while simultaneously surrendering the initiative to them. A classic expression in Russian is "*Nachal'stvu luchshe vidno*," or roughly translated, 'The bosses know better.' Because most people's experience in actual politics is small, their political sophistication and competence and their ability to get things done are low. Most people feel powerless and exploited, but still do not imagine that it is possible to improve matters through their own political initiative. (Yergin and Gustafson 1995, p. 108)

Even in the discourse of self-professed "democrats," the scene/act motivational structure frequently emerged as central to their worldviews, creating the sort of fracturing of democratic identity Burke suggested in his contrast of agent/act and

scene/act ratios in the motivational structure of democracy. Ishiyama et al. (1997) suggest that many of the new “democratic” parties in the 1993 Duma election, notably Russia’s Choice, employed a language of economic determinism in which a market economy would lead to a democratic people. In Janack’s 2002 analysis, Yeltsin’s re-election in 1996 was in part conditioned by his reliance on the same deterministic (scene/act) formula:

Despite Yeltsin’s image as a democrat and his apparent eagerness to dismantle the Soviet system, his articulation of the relationship between economics and politics was not all that far removed from that of the Marxist philosophy that served as the foundation of the system.... Yeltsin’s rhetoric has associated the free market so closely with democratic freedoms that a prospering capitalist economy has become a necessary precondition for personal and political freedoms in Russia. (pp. 68-69)

Yeltsin’s authoritarian actions promulgated economic reforms that were presumed to lead to a democratic people. Yet, as we have seen, the scene/act motivational structure is at tension with identification of a “democratic people,” leading instead to a familiar passivity and deference to the iron-fist of Authority.

5. Conclusion

“Managed democracy,” as articulated and practiced by Putin, resonates with the consubstantial motive structure of many Russians identified through the scene/act orientation. Even in the democratic euphoria of the early 1990s, as *Russia 2010* reported, “In poll after poll, Russians speak of their longing for order and a leader” (Yergin and Gustafson 1995, p. 102). After the chaos of the Yeltsin years, after the demise of “democracy” as an ultimate order of identification that could create a new consubstantiality of a “democratic people” in Russia, Putin’s relegation of democracy to something regulated and managed by a central authority that is capable of enforcing order and security resonated with the engrained scene/act motive structure. Putin’s popularity suggests there is a consubstantiality of identity among many Russians that revives and restores a familiar and comfortable motive structure, which renders “new Russians” in many fundamental ways not dissimilar from “old Russians.”

Managed democracy remains the order of the day in Russia. It preserves the scene-act mind-set, re-establishing comfortable complacency in people and promoting reliance on leaders to preserve security and order (and through order,

“freedom”). “Democracy” is at best situational, and the leaders decide the domains within which democracy can function (See Williams and Marin 2010). The political transformation of post-Soviet Russia saw a flirtation with the identity of democrats (and perhaps some cross-dressing) but by 2010 the flirtation seems reduced to an occasional performance designed for consumption by the Western world, not to the consummation of the Russian Federation as a democracy or the Russian people as democrats. Echoing Burke’s assessment of the motivational structure of democracy, *Russia 2010* posits:

When all is said and done, the prospects for democracy will depend on the quality of the human material, the civic values of the community, the attitudes of individuals. In the long run, there can be no democracy without democrats, without a democratic culture. (Yergin and Gustafson 1995, p. 108)

Accordingly, if it remains on its current course, it seems highly unlikely that Russia will develop into a democratic society as that concept is understood in the West. As Yergin and Gustafson (1995) observed, “the odds against the evolution of democracy in Russia are daunting.... Perhaps the greatest enemies of all [to democracy] are the masses of skeptical souls in Russia itself” (p. 102).

NOTES

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